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IN/VISIBLE FAMILIES:
EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, QUEER, TRANS-IDENTIFIED, AND TWO-SPIRITED PARENTS IN NORTHERN ONTARIO SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to learn about the nature of interactions between Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Trans-Identified, and Two-Spirited (LGBQTT[1]) parents and their children's teachers and school principals. A case study and narrative inquiry methodology was used to examine the research questions in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture the experiences of six parents in Northern Ontario. This method of study allowed for each participant to tell their own story about their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about being an LGBQTT parent in a school community. Five common themes were identified during data analysis. These themes were: (1) coming out at school; (2) impact of disclosure on their children; (3) acceptance and validation; (4) lack of representation of non-normative families; and (5) high parental involvement in their children's schools. The participants in this study emphasized the importance of full disclosure of family structure in school. They felt accepted and validated by school staff, but were acutely aware that homophobia and heterosexism nevertheless exists in school communities. The thesis concludes with recommendations for teachers, principals, and LGBQTT parents, as well as ideas for future research.

[1] Although I have chosen to use this particular acronym, literature on LGBQTT issues represents a wide variety of acronyms and I will only stray from LGBQTT when quoting from theorists who use other forms.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

> "Life in the school yard is not easy for parents and children who are at the forefront of social change." (Lindsay, Perlesz, Brown, McNair, de Vaus, and Pitts, 2006, p. 1074)

On October 3, 2008, Jane Currie and her partner Anji Dimitriou were waiting outside their children's school in Oshawa, Ontario when one of the other parents attacked them. The man verbally and physically assaulted both women as other parents and children watched in shock (Welsh, 2008). This incident might be considered an extreme case; however, it does raise awareness about the risk of homophobic harassment and violence that some LGBQTT-parented families encounter within hostile climates of school communities. Kosciw and Diaz (2008) emphasize that LGBQTT-parented families face the risk of stigmatization and abuse in their children's school. Casper and Schultz (1999) assert that it is common for teachers, principals, and heterosexual parents to view "homosexuality" as a threat to the education of children[2]. Undoubtedly, negative perceptions create a hostile and unwelcoming school environment for LGBQTT-parented families. The result is that many LGBQTT parents are often invisible and excluded in school communities (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

Over the past decade, societal tolerance for LGBQTT people has increased, as has the visibility of LGBQTT-parented families in the media. For instance, the most recent representation of LGBQTT-parented families on American television is in 'Modern Family,'

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[2] It is also important to note that the story previously mentioned involving Jane and Anji does not constitute "homosexuality" in the literal sense. For instance, the two mothers waiting for their children out outside of the school is not synonymous with "homosexuality," just as opposite sex parents waiting for their children is not synonymous with "heterosexuality."

which includes gay fathers, Cameron and Mitchell, who adopted a Vietnamese-born daughter named Lily. This television series first aired in 2009. The existence of non-normative families has also become more evident in some school communities. However, there are still very few school professionals who have the training, comfort level, or willingness to adequately address the needs of LGBQTT-parented families in their schools (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 2000; Jeltova & Fish, 2005; Ryan & Martin, 2000) despite increased representation of such families on television shows and other media.

Kosciw and Diaz (2008) found that LGBQTT parents often feel excluded, ignored, and invisible in their children's schools. Yet, a study conducted in Ohio on the school experiences of lesbian parents and their children reported they felt their experiences were generally positive (McLaughlin, 1995). Lindsay, Perlesz, Brown, McNair, de Vaus, and Pitts (2006) identify several key factors which could assist in the creation of a school environment where LGBQTT-parented families would have positive experiences, namely: the presence of other LGBQTT-parented families; the acknowledgment of diverse family structures in the curriculum; and the pre-existing resilience of LGBQTT parents' children. LGBQTT parents who are activists and participate in advocacy work in LGBQTT organizations and communities are likely to be involved in their child's school; in turn, their participation will assist in creating an inclusive and welcoming school community for LGBQTT-parented families (Mercier & Harold, 2003). Furthermore, Lindsay and her colleagues (2006) state that the social and political climate in the community is another important factor in shaping the interactions LGBQTT parents have in schools.

When LGBQTT parents are out and proud about their families in schools, they are more apt to feel empowered, accepted, and able to challenge heteronormative discourse and practices

that affect their families (Lindsay et al., 2006). For instance, Kosciw and Diaz's (2008) study revealed that LGBQTT parents are highly engaged in their children's school, and more likely to work harder than other parents to create and ensure their children are learning in a safe environment. Thus, increased participation of these parents in school communities is highly beneficial for all children, teachers, and principals. When teachers and principals do not acknowledge LGBQTT-parented families, they risk alienating and isolating these parents and losing the benefits of their involvement. On the other hand, LGBQTT parents who normalize their family structure by challenging heteronormative discourses and being visible in the school can act as positive role models for LGBQTT youth in schools. Thus, LGBQTT parents who are out and proud in their children's school may contribute to the creation of a safe space for LGBQTT youth to fully disclose their sexuality identity at school (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

The current study sought to understand the nature of the interactions of LGBQTT-parented families within school communities. More specifically, this study focused on the experiences of LGBQTT parents who live in isolated and socially conservative communities in Northern Ontario that do not have as many LGBQTT support services and resources for parents as large, urban Canadian cities where the majority of Canada's LGBQTT population resides. Knowledge gained from this study will be valuable to teachers and principals in the region by giving them an inside perspective of the lives of LGBQTT-parented families in their schools; it may also be relevant to those in other regions in Canada or elsewhere.

Context and Background

In 2003, the Legislative Assembly in the Ontario Government passed Bill 18 which defines the boundaries representing Northern Ontario as the District Municipality of Muskoka,

and the Territorial Districts of Algoma, Cochrane, Manitoulin, Nipissing, Kenora, Rainy River, Parry Sound, Sudbury, Thunder Bay, and Temiskaming (Bill 18, Ontario Legislative Assembly, 2003). According to the 2006 Census, Northern Ontario is nearly 90% of the landmass of Ontario, but has only 6% of the population. One third of the population in the north lives in rural settings and the remaining two thirds live in the urban areas.

The geographical location of the study is significant. From my experience as a lesbian woman who has lived in various communities in Northern Ontario, I have observed that even in the larger communities in this region, such as Sudbury and Thunder Bay, LGBQTT communities are predominantly closeted with a significant lack of resources, gay-owned establishments, and support groups for LGBQTT people. Sudbury is the only community that has a gay bar, which is certainly not representative of other Canadian LGBQTT communities.

In general, Smith (1997) describes how LGBQTT in smaller communities often remain socially and geographically isolated from each other. Lindhorst (1997) also claims that these areas are more frequently home to a conservative, political climate that emphasizes so called traditional moral values that are rooted in religious doctrines that depict homosexuality as a sin. Within such a context, LGBQTT-parented families are not validated. Indeed, conservative moral climates can be hostile towards the mere presence of LGBQTT people, and their families. As O'Neill (2003) states, "in general, heterosexist attitudes are associated with being male, older, less educated and living in a rural area" (p. 132). Another relevant and significant aspect of Northern Ontario is that in-migration rates are considerably lower than those of Southern Ontario. Very few migrants from outside of Canada choose to move to Northern Ontario (Southcott, 2001). Low immigration could be one explanation for the fact that my study

participants were not terribly diverse socio-culturally; of the six participants, five are white Anglophones and one is Aboriginal.

While LGBQTT people can be geographically isolated in northern regions in Canada, census data indicates their increasing visibility in Canadian society more broadly. The 2001 census, the first census to collect data on gay and lesbian people in Canada, identified 34,200 same-sex couples; of these, 15 percent were lesbian couples and 3 percent were gay male couples were living with children (Brown, 2007). The 2006 census identified 45,345 same-sex couples, an increase of 32.6 percent between 2001 and 2006. According to this census, 16.3 percent of lesbian couples and 2.9 percent of gay male couples had children living with them (Statistics Canada, 2007). Casper, Schultz and Wickens (1992) suggest that LGBQTT political and social movements have increased the visibility of LGBQTT-parented families, one facet of which is census data.

Over the past two decades, LGBQTT people in Canada have received considerable media attention from legal victories. For example, in 1998, *Vriend v. Alberta* was heard in the Supreme Court of Canada and was a significant victory that led to the inclusion, protection and equal rights of LGBQTT people under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. After being fired from his job at a Christian college in Edmonton because he was gay, Delwin Vriend tried to file a human rights complaint against the college but was unable to do so because "sexual orientation" was not included in Alberta's human rights legislation. For this reason, he brought forward a Charter challenge alleging his equality rights were violated by the Alberta government (Fisher, 2003). The Supreme Court overwhelmingly agreed that the government cannot deny LGBQTT people the same human rights protection given to other minorities in Canada. "The court ordered that 'sexual orientation' be read into Alberta's human rights legislation" (Fisher,

2003, p. 4.3). Another example is the passing of Bill C-38 on June 28, 2005, which granted same-sex couples the right to legally marry in Canada.

In light of such legal recognition, Casper, Schultz and Wickens (1992) suggest that increasing societal tolerance for diverse family structures and increasing visibility in the media has encouraged many LGBQTT people to have children of their own. Martin and Ryan (2000) use the term 'gayby boom' to describe a movement among 'out' lesbian and gay couples who are choosing to create their families using donor insemination, adoption, and surrogacy. As a result, more LGBQTT-parented families are identifying themselves in schools, many doing so within the heterosexist cultures of schools. As Jeltova and Fish (2005) assert, "social institutions, including schools, are often steeped in the more traditional family model and despite efforts to adapt to the needs of changing and diverse family structures they often lag behind societal realities" (p. 18).

My research took place during a legal and political era where equal rights of LGBQTT individuals and couples are being defended and won. In the Canadian context, the progress of LGBQTT equality has been highly significant, yet school districts have not kept pace with legal recognitions. Walton (2005a) describes how LGBQTT people continue to face "stigmatization, marginalization, social invisibility, and pervasive accusations of deviance, while discussions in schools about related issues are generally prohibited" (p. 92). Despite the increasing visibility of LGBQTT-parented families, very few research studies have focused on their experiences and needs in school systems (Martin & Ryan, 2000). Likewise, even less has been researched about the experiences of LGBQTT parents in Canadian schools, or more specifically, those in Northern Ontario.

One exception is Mavis (2003) who highlights various issues that are significant to LGBQTT in rural Ontario. The individuals in her study identified homophobia, intolerance, and ignorance as three persistent problems affecting the lives of LGBQTT people; the most common recommendation to address these issues was education. She states that, "the consistency of comments made about issues related to sexual identity and their community's lack of awareness and/or intolerance was striking" (p. 116). Thus, she emphasizes the importance of raising awareness and striving for social equity for LGBQTT parents by educating rural, conservative communities.

As for research on families, most of it presumes that lesbian and gay parenting is problematic, questionable, and harmful (Millbank, 2003). The majority of the literature either focuses on a comparative approach that positions gay and lesbian parents in the subordinate position to heterosexual parents, or tries to demonstrate that children of lesbian and gay parents are not deviant or clinically pathological (Cameron & Cameron, 1996; Patterson, 1992). Nevertheless, several books on LGBQTT-parented families have been published which offer support, encouragement, and guidance to families on issues faced by non-heterosexual parents. The books include *And Baby Makes More: Known Donors, Queer Parents, and Our Unexpected Families* (Rose & Goldberg, 2009), *Who's Your Daddy? And Other Writings on Queer Parenting* (Epstein, 2009), *The Queer Parent's Primer: A Lesbian and Gay Families' Guide to Navigating through a Straight World* (Brill, 2001), and *Gay and Lesbian Parenting* (Drescher & Glazer, 2001).

Rationale for the research study

In my research, I sought to learn about the nature of the interactions between LGBQTT parents and their children's teachers and school principals, particularly given the general increase in social tolerance towards and visibility of LGBQTT people and families. I assumed that despite these changes in society, implicit yet pervasive ideology privileges individuals who conform to the dominant sexual orientation, heterosexuality, which contributes to the continuing marginalization of LGBQTT people. O'Neill (2003) states that "because heterosexuality is presented as natural and universal, oppression related to sexual orientation has been widely supported at least tacitly, and, for the most part, gone unrecognized" (p. 129). To address such oppression, I aspired to provide an important venue through which LGBQTT parents may discuss their experiences about having children in public schools.

Smith (2004) argues that silencing the voices of LGBQTT people in schools and treating them as something that is only tolerable in the private sphere is oppressive. She states that "this erasure is deeply stigmatizing for same-sex parents and their children and creates another generation who view lesbian and gay life as deviant from the heterosexual norm" (p. 138). I hope that my research will offer teachers and school principals an opportunity to learn about the numerous issues that explicitly and implicitly impact the lives of participants I interviewed for this study. Moreover, I hope that the stories the participants shared with me will contribute to the broader movement that builds social, political, and cultural equity for LGBQTT people in Canada. By listening to and magnifying the voices of these parents, I believe this research will be instructive for school communities, all of which need to understand how to create inclusive, anti-oppressive school environments that meet the needs of LGBQTT-parented families.

My Personal Background

My decision to pursue a thesis topic related to LGBQTT issues in education was not an easy choice. At the beginning of the master's program last year, I knew that my main interests involved studying this topic; nevertheless, I originally made my choice to pursue a thesis topic that would not raise the question of my sexuality identity on a continual basis. As a feminist, lesbian woman who has taught in the Canadian and British education systems for the last four years, my trepidations are valid because I have personally witnessed heterosexist and homophobic discrimination within school communities. As a closeted teacher, I understood how choosing not to disclose one's sexuality identity might be the only viable option. By conducting this research, I fear the possibility of discrimination in the form of limited employment opportunities in the field of education. I have learned from past experiences that LGBQTT issues as they pertain to education are often blatantly silenced. For instance, the lack of LGBQTT visibility in the curriculum and the prevalence of homophobic bullying will further intensify the silence that surrounds the discussion of LGBQTT issues in schools. Needless to say, I have made the personal decision to pursue this area of study because I believe it will increase the level of awareness, acceptance, and acknowledgement that is ultimately needed within education systems. From this study, I seek to learn how LGBQTT parents cope in institutions that are historically founded upon dominant ideology that normalises heterosexual parented families exclusively.

Research Questions

The questions guiding this research were:

1) How do LGBQTT parents in Northern Ontario describe their interactions with teachers and principals in their children`s schools?

2) How do LGBQTT parents negotiate parent-school relationships?
3) In what ways and to what extent do LGBQTT parents feel their families are affected by their interactions within the school community?
4) Do LGBQTT parents believe the size and geographical location of their hometown in Northern Ontario has an effect on their family's experiences at school? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
5) What recommendations do LGBQTT parents have for school administrators and teachers on how to challenge heteronormativity and increase full inclusion of their families in school communities?

The Organization of the Thesis

This research study is presented in five chapters. This first chapter was written as a conceptual tool to set the stages for the following chapters. It outlines the context, background, research questions, and rationale for the study. Chapter two is a review of existing literature regarding LGBQTT-parented families in schools and of Queer Theory, the theoretical framework of the study. The third chapter outlines the methodology and methods used in the research. Chapter four provides a detailed explanation of the themes that emerged from the transcripts. The discussion of the findings is also integrated into this chapter. The last chapter offers recommendations for teachers, principals, and LGBQTT parents, as well as concluding remarks and questions for future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In order to provide an overall context for my research study, an in-depth review of the literature regarding the experiences of LGBQTT parents within their children's schools needed to be conducted. The literature review chapter of my thesis provides a foundation for understanding the issues and challenges that LGBQTT-parented families encounter in heteronormative school communities. Walton (2006) defines heteronormativity as "an ideology of sexuality that gives rise to homophobic and heterosexist behaviour, attitudes, and institutional regulations that delineate inclusion and privilege on one hand, and exclusion and disadvantage on the other" (p. 123). Information about heteronormativity, heterosexism and homophobia, disclosure, parent-school relationships, and inclusive school curriculum will be examined in this section. Additionally, literature on queer theory will also be described and will provide the theoretical frame of the study.

Heteronormativity, Heterosexism and Homophobia

Heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia are three deeply rooted concepts that describe ideologies, frameworks, and practices in society, including educational institutions. Heteronormativity is an invisible but pervasive process that designates heterosexuality as normal, natural, superior and true sexuality, ultimately rendering anyone who is non-heterosexual as the deviant 'other' (Robinson, 2007). It is the process of heteronormativity that encourages and leads individuals to assume everyone is heterosexual (Friend, 1998). This dominant system of power and privilege runs rampant in school communities. Epstein and

Johnson (1994) point out that "normalisation of heterosexuality is 'encoded in language' in institutional practices and the encounters of everyday life" (p. 198). Heteronormativity is further reinforced in cultural values of the school. The normalisation of heterosexuality is reflected in the exclusion of LGBQTT-parented families in the curriculum, policies, verbal communication, events, and school documents (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992). Similar to heteronormativity, heterosexism is defined as "personal and institutionalized bias against gay people, and is responsible for the assumption that everyone is heterosexual unless proven otherwise" (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992, p. 112).

Casper, Schultz and Wickens (1992) identified heterosexist attitudes among teachers who they interviewed. These teachers seemed to conflate sex and sexual acts with what it means to be a LGBQTT parent. Walton (2009) describes this heterosexist bias as "a strategy of containment that privileges straight people but reduces gay and lesbian people to sexualities" (p. 212). Walton (2009) also describes how LGBQTT people in schools do not have access to the many privileges of which heterosexuals most often remain unaware. He states:

> In schools across the country, it is taken for granted that students will form heterosexual relationships and demonstrate them in schools through such behaviour as holding hands. It is never questioned that parents may come to the school as a couple on parent-teacher interview days. It never sparks controversy when heterosexual couples dance together at school dances. Such taken for granted assumptions are both heterosexist and heteronormative. (p. 218)

Likewise, Friend (1998) recognizes two ways in which heterosexist beliefs are passed on in schools: systematic exclusion and systematic inclusion. He describes systematic inclusion as the way schools negatively portray LGBQTT people, and often present false information that leads to negative assumptions. In contrast, systematic exclusion is "the process whereby positive role models, messages, and images of lesbian, gay and bisexual people are publicly silenced in

schools" (Friend, 1993, p. 215). The systematic inclusion and exclusion of LGBQTT people upholds and reinforces heteronormative ideals. Increasing anti-gay discrimination and harassment in schools and the absence of non-heterosexuals within the curriculum and school policies has undoubtedly intensified occurrences of heterosexism and homophobia in schools (Sattell, Keyes, Tupper, & Marinoble, 1997).

Homophobia is a pervasive issue for LGBQTT youth and their families in schools. Homophobic language is at epidemic proportions, creating a predominantly hostile and unsafe environment for anyone who does not identify as heterosexual (GLSEN, 2007). Egale (2008), Canada's only national lobby group for LGBQTT people, describes homophobia as "a fear and/or hatred of homosexuality in others... anyone who is LGBQTT or assumed to be LGBQTT can be a target of homophobia" (p. 1). Blumenfeld (1992) moves beyond simply describing homophobia and identifies four separate levels on which homophobia is manifested: personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural. Personal homophobia refers to an individual's belief system that gays and lesbians should be pitied and hated for their disturbed, deranged, immoral lifestyle. Interpersonal homophobia is noticeable when an individual's own personal bias against LGBQTT people is transformed into discrimination. Institutional homophobia occurs when business, government, religious, and educational organizations discriminate against an individual based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation. Blumenfeld (1992) describes cultural homophobia as "social norms or codes of behaviour that, although not expressly written into law or policy, nonetheless work within society to legitimize oppression" (p.6). The intersection of the four levels of homophobia has the potential to effect the daily interactions of LGBQTT-parented families in schools by creating an explicitly and implicitly hostile climate.

Despite these multiple forms of homophobia, researchers who have analyzed the ways that such forms of homophobia play out in schools have tended to focus on students' experiences. In March 2009, for instance, the results of the first national climate survey on homophobia in Canadian schools were released by Egale Canada. This survey began in 2007 and involved 1700 students nationally. Results revealed that six out of ten LGBQTT students reported verbal harassment due to their sexual orientation, and one in four were physically harassed. In addition, findings also revealed two thirds of LGBQTT students and a little less than half of non-LGBQTT students have seen homophobic graffiti at school, and one in seven LGBQTT students were named in the graffiti. As for homophobic remarks at school, half of the participants heard words such as "faggot," "queer," "lezbo," and "dyke" on a daily basis; furthermore, over half of LGBQTT students, compared to just one-third of non-LBGQTT students, heard these comments daily. In regards to school staff taking action against homophobia, LGBQTT students surveyed were more likely than non-LGBQTT students to claim that staff never intervened when homophobic remarks were made (Egale, 2008). School staff members who neglect to intervene and end homophobic harassment play a central role in encouraging and defending homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity in schools (Friend, 1998).

As important as such findings are, the experiences of LGBQTT parents need further consideration in research studies. Researchers who have conducted interviews with LGBQTT parents suggest that the experiences of LGBQTT parents in schools are similar to the experiences of LGBQTT students (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000; Lamme & Lamme, 2002; Woog, 1995). LGBQTT parents often encounter homophobic prejudice in schools when interacting with teachers and administrators. Thus, many school professionals have stereotypical and biased

beliefs about LGBQTT-parented families (Jeltova & Fish, 2005). For instance, many people assume an LGBQTT person can be identified by their mannerisms and clothing. A common misconception is that lesbians appear butch and masculine, have short hair, and wear comfortable footwear, whereas gay men are considered fashionable, well groomed, and exhibit feminine mannerisms (Clarke & Turner, 2007). Another common assumption is that children raised by LGBQTT parents will become gay or lesbian because they do not have the appropriate heterosexual role models. These stereotypes can have a negative effect on the experiences of the LGBQTT-parented families in school communities. Furthermore, such stereotypes reinforce heteronormative and homophobic beliefs by making LGBQTT people appear different from heterosexuals (Jeltova & Fish, 2005).

Walton (2009) further states that "homophobia hinges upon the assumption that being gay or lesbian is only about sexuality, and not mere sexuality, but an inferior version of the heterosexual norm" (p. 217). He identifies how lesbians and gays are told not to 'flaunt' their sexual orientation in public. Such a statement would not be directed towards heterosexuals who are seen holding hands in the public sphere. Also, Walton (2009) reports how some heterosexuals claim they need to protect their children from being exposed to the so called 'gay lifestyle.' He asserts that such a lifestyle attributable to all LGBQTT people does not exist. Heterosexuals and homosexuals both lead various lifestyles. He describes how this belief is embedded in homophobia because it presumes heterosexuality is not a lifestyle; therefore, it does not have to be justified. On the contrary, the term 'gay lifestyle' is linked to the need to justify and explain such a lifestyle. He describes how "reductionist discourse" is used to discriminate and foster homophobic beliefs. This discourse only focuses on a person's sexual orientation, while neglecting to recognize other significant aspects of a person's life such as identity and

family (Walton, 2009). "Reductionist discourse" can have a profound impact on the lives of LGBQTT-parented families in school communities. For instance, teachers and principals who focus their attention on the parents' sexuality identity and fail to acknowledge other equally important aspects of LGBQTT-parented families are limiting the opportunity to create inclusive school communities. All aspects of LGBQTT-parented families need to be accepted and acknowledged in order to reduce discrimination and challenge heteronormative bias.

Disclosure

According to Lindsay, Perlesz, Brown, McNair, de Vaus and Pitts (2006), most LGBQTT parents face the anxious decision about whether to disclose their sexual orientation to their child's classroom teacher. This decision can be difficult even though teachers are legally responsible to uphold the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms by not discriminating against individuals based on gender, sexual orientation, and/or family configuration (Walton, 2009). Yet because of the persistent form of heteronormativity in the assumption that heterosexual parents are 'normal' while non-heterosexuals are deviant, LGBQTT-parented families undeniably grapple with this ongoing and emotionally burdening decision about whether to "display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when and where" (Goffman, 1973, p. 57). Without a doubt, LGBQTT parents understand the profound positive and negative ramifications of this decision on not only themselves, but also their children.

There are many factors that will influence a parent's final decision. In Katherine Arnup's (1995) book, *Lesbian Parenting: Living with Pride and Prejudice*, one parent who she interviewed describes her fear and anxiety about her child in nursery school:

> Around this time, I remember my anxiety about my daughter's nursery school teacher knowing I was a lesbian. I went into crisis each time my lover took my daughter to school or brought her home. I kept saying that we should wait until my daughter was older before being so open about our relationship. I felt that when my daughter was older she would be able to tell me if she was being picked on by her teacher. (Arnup, 1995, p. 299)

This mother's feelings of fear and anxiety are often a common reality that LGBQTT parents experience when they choose to disclose their family configuration. Lindsay, Perlesz, Brown, McNair, de Vaus and Pitts (2006) conceptualize three levels of disclosure: the proud, the selective, and the private. The "proud" strategy is used by parents who choose to make a commitment to open disclosure of their sexuality identity. The "selective" strategy is used when parents make the decision to disclose or not depending on the circumstances, whereas the "private" strategy implies active non-disclosure in all situations. The level of disclosure depends on a multitude of factors such as the extent to which the family has a public profile in the community, the age of the children, the presence of other 'out' LGBQTT-parented families at the school, the personalities of the children, and whether the family configuration is blended or intentional. Casper, Schultz and Wickens (1992) describes intentional families as "families where children are born through alternative insemination or adopted by parents who have already come out as gay," and blended families are "families where children were born within heterosexual relationships and the parent 'came out' afterward" (p. 113). The demographics, socio-economic status, and ethnic diversity of the area around the school are also critical factors that effect the parents' decision to "come out" or not. Lindsay et al. (2006) report LGBQTT-parented families who live in diverse, inner-city suburbs dominated by middle class educated folks were more likely to "come out" and have positive experiences within the school community.

Before and after making this decision, parents undoubtedly fear the impact of such disclosure on their children. The fear does not go away after a decision has been made. The most common parental fears are about their children being rejected, harassed and stigmatized by their peers (Sears, 1996). Regardless of the internal and external factors that influence decisions to disclose or not, Ryan and Martin (2000) argue that, "it is most advantageous for the child, the family, and the entire school community when a family chooses to be completely open with everyone about having sexual minority parents" (p. 208). In addition, Patterson (2000) states studies have shown a correlation between lesbian mothers' psychological well-being and disclosure of their sexual orientation.

There are numerous advantages for LGBQTT-parented families who choose to fully disclose their family configuration in school communities. Openness about family structure will help facilitate open discussion about family diversity in the classroom, enable educational professionals to make more accurate assessments and referrals for the child, and create a more honest and open relationship between the child's parents and school professionals (Ryan & Martin, 2000). While there are definite benefits to LGBQTT-parented families who choose to fully disclose their sexual orientation, this option might be more difficult for families who are living in conservative communities where the risks of homophobic harassment, discrimination, and rejection are a harsh reality. Unquestionably, there are families who are in a stronger position to challenge heterosexism and homophobia than others (Lindsay, Perlesz, Brown, McNair, de Vaus & Pitts, 2006). Lindsay et al. (2006) claim that it is LGBQTT parents who enrol their children in progressive, inner-city, gay-friendly, culturally mixed school communities who are more likely to challenge heterosexist curriculum and school policies.

Parent-School Relationships

The importance of parent-school relationships has been well documented in the research literature. This extensive body of literature reveals how parent-school partnerships are beneficial for all students; therefore, schools have been encouraged to create school environments that facilitate the full participation of all parents as 'co-contributors' in their child's educational success (Esler, Godber, & Christenson, 2002). Epstein (1995) states the development of school, family, and community partnerships can help children succeed in school and in the future. This fundamental partnership can be assumed to be particularly imperative for LGBQTT-parented families because non-normative families are often invisible, excluded, and ignored in school communities. Regardless of how crucial the development of parent-school relationships is to the education of children, Kosciw and Diaz (2008) indicate that the experiences of LGBQTT parents and their children in American schools are generally characterized by a lack of inclusion. Their data revealed that 53% of parents described how they were excluded from school policies and procedures. Likewise, some parents felt they were unable to fully participate in school activities and events due to the discomfort, ignorance and hostile behaviour by school staff and other parents towards themselves and/or their children. Yet, from the 588 parents surveyed for this study, Kosciw and Diaz (2008) found an increased involvement of LGBQTT parents in their child's education, compared to the involvement of parents in the general population. The findings show that 67% of LGBQTT parents, compared to 42% of other parents, are likely to volunteer and attend events at their children's school. Moreover, "68% of LGBT parents reported contacting their child's school about his or her school program for that year, compared to 38% of parents nationally" (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008, p. xv). These findings suggest that many if not most LGBQTT parents are concerned and highly engaged in their child's education. Despite

the significant benefits of involving LGBQTT parents in their child's education, parent-school relationships are often inadequate and hindered by multiple factors, such as homophobic prejudice and heterosexist beliefs (Ryan & Martin, 2000).

Nonetheless, before parents can be involved in this partnership, they must first be identified. One significant challenge for teachers and principals in working with LGBQTT-parented families is identifying them as such. In general, LGBQTT-parented families do not conform to the normative model of two biological parents who live in the same home with their children, which certainly is not the case for many straight parents either. Nevertheless, the nuclear family model remains the most privileged family formation in ideology and representations in the media (Heath, 2009). Like many straight families, LGBQTT-parented families are made up of diverse configurations. For instance, there may be a biological, adoptive, or foster mother or father who assumes a full parenting role. Furthermore, many LGBQTT-parented families contain more than two parents. The parent's current partner might play an active role in parenting, yet previous partners may also continue to co-parent after separation (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992; Hulsebosch & Koerner, 1996).

Martin and Ryan (2000) claim that "identifying the functional parents is essential to the development of effective working relationships between the family and school personnel" (p. 208). When LGBQTT parents try to develop relationships with school personnel, they are often faced with implicit and explicit obstacles. Homophobic bias and/or personal religious beliefs held by school staff are two obstacles that can hinder the development of a strong relationship between both parties. Other impeding factors include traditional beliefs about normative gender roles, and staff who believe talking about LGBQTT issues is congruent to talking about sex, thus the topic will be avoided due to discomfort (Ryan & Martin, 2000). Kissen (2002) also states

that teachers receive insufficient preparation to work with LGBQTT parents, inhibiting teachers from addressing the needs of this minority group. Due to these persistent societal barriers, schools and families are often unsuccessful in establishing effective communication, and it is this lack of communication which amplifies preconceived beliefs and assumptions about each other (Davies, 1997; Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998).

Inclusive School Curriculum

There is a high need for school curriculum to be inclusive of LGBQTT-parented families, youths, and their children. Notably, there is a significant lack of material across all subjects in provincial curriculum documents that focus on LGBQTT issues. This absence in the curriculum renders the experiences of LGBQTT people in school communities as non-existent and irrelevant (Wotherspoon, 1998). Prince (1996) notes the typical response of principals when the issue of LGBQTT curriculum inclusion arises, which "is to either ignore the issue, hope that it will fade away or to relegate the issue to the health or sex education curriculum" (p. 30). Friend (1997) describes how the curriculum must be transformed to reflect an inclusive school environment that is representative of diverse family constellations. He states:

> [when] books on the shelves, posters on the walls, and pamphlets in the racks include images of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, then inclusiveness is promoted. The message, while subtle but powerful, helps to build an inclusive learning community that recognizes multiple voices. (p.12)

Ultimately, recognition and discussion about diverse family structures can create a dialogue that facilitates an inclusive school environment. Jeltova and Fish (2005) emphasize that schools must address and include LGBQTT issues in extracurricular activities, history, social sciences, and English lessons to genuinely integrate the experiences of LGBQTT people in the curriculum. In

2002, the Supreme Court of Canada sided with James Chamberlain, then a kindergarten teacher in Surrey, BC, and overturned the Surrey District School Board's decision in 1997 to ban three children's books that illustrated lesbian and gay parents. This case was known as the "Surrey Book Ban," and was challenged by Mr. Chamberlain and supporters who questioned the normalization of heterosexual families in the curriculum to the exclusion of LGBQTT families. Several other teachers also insisted on mandatory lesbian and gay-positive reading materials for all classrooms in an effort to avoid simplistic, tokenistic representations that still position LGBQTT-parented families as the visible 'other' to 'normal' families (Smith, 2004).

In the last few years, several curriculum documents have been published that are valuable guides for teachers who want to challenge school environments that are oppressive to LGBQTT-parented families. The documents include *Rainbow and Triangles: A Curriculum Document for Challenging Homophobia and Heterosexism in the K-6 Classroom* (Toronto District School Board, 2002), *Imagine a World that is Free from Fear: A Kindergarten to Grade 8 Resource for Addressing Issues Relating to Homophobia and Heterosexism* (Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, 2004), and *Shaping a Culture of Respect in our Schools: Promoting Safe and Healthy Relationships* (Ministry of Education, 2008). Such resources can educate school staff about issues experienced by LGBQTT communities. They also can teach heterosexuals the importance of verbal and written inclusive language for the development of a school climate free of homophobic and heterosexist behaviours (Jeltova & Fish, 2005). Moreover, the dissemination of such documents in schools supports LGBQTT parents who obviously want schools to positively acknowledge their children's reality that they are from loving families.

Ultimately, LGBQTT parents can take a proactive role in creating an inclusive school environment for their children. Some parents research individual schools before selecting one,

choose full disclosure of their family configuration from the beginning, and directly challenge any incidences of homophobia experienced by anyone in the family (Lindsay et al., 2006). Parents who take a proactive stance are highly influential in restructuring the curriculum because they are more likely to explicitly ask teachers how they plan to include non-heterosexual families in the classroom (Lindsay et al., 2006).

Queer Theory – Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in queer theory, which emerged from the work of North American scholars in the late 1980s. Queer theorists suggested that "gay and lesbian studies" was not sufficiently inclusive and encompassing of the ambiguity that surrounded issues of sexual and gender identity politics. The term 'queer' can be used as a noun and refer to individuals who feel "marginalized by mainstream sexuality" (Morris, 2000, p.20). Queer theory thus can challenge heterosexist notions that define heterosexuality as 'normal' and homosexuality as 'deviant' (Gibson, 1999). Queer can also be used as a verb, where the act of 'queering' seeks to deconstruct sexual and gender categories by systematically examining and dismantling traditional boundaries (Meyer, 2007). As Robinson (2007) explains:

> This perspective upholds that all identities are performances. It challenges the unquestionable, natural, and normal positioning of heterosexuality as the superior sexuality and the 'othering' of non-heterosexual identities, which is constituted within the cultural binary heterosexual us–homosexual them. (p. 7)

Queer theory moves past the exploration of gay and lesbian identity and experiences, and delves into 'taken for granted' assumptions about rigid categories that exist in society (Robinson, 2007). Furthermore, Butler (1990) points out that the "epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality" enforces the divide between male and female (p. 151). The work

of Butler (1990), Britzman (1995), Bem (1993), and Foucault (1991) offers educators an opportunity to scrutinize all conventional categories that society considers to be 'normal.' For example, Butler's (1990) theory of performativity and a heterosexual matrix identifies the powerful connection between gender and heterosexuality. She explains "it is the repetition of the performance of masculinities and femininities that constructs the masculine and feminine subject" (p. 156); by performing repetitive acts and recitations, gender is inextricably linked and normalised through the process of 'heterosexualization.'

Britzman (1995) argues queer theory needs to be brought into pedagogical practices in order to raise questions regarding the 'conceptual geography of normalization.' Queer theory, and by extension queer pedagogy, must be focused on interrogating the production of normalization as a problem in our culture and thoughts. Moreover, Bem (1993) explains how 'gender polarization' works to reinforce heterosexuality in two significant ways. Gender polarization defines exclusive rituals for being a male and a female, thereby rendering individuals who do not follow these prescribed rituals as deviant and problematic. She explains "the effects of these two processes are to construct and naturalize a gender-polarizing link between the sex of one's body and the character of one's psyche and sexuality" (Bem, 1993, p. 81). Foucault (1991) adds that power and knowledge are constructed through discourse. He insists that language is power; thus, "knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, becomes true" (Foucault, 1976, p. 27). If this is so, then educators are responsible for identifying and initiating discourse for minority groups who are marginalized.

Queer theory can also be applied to the privileged, normalized positioning of the two-parent, heteronormative family model. The concept of family is heterosexualized and the heterosexual family is seen as the superior, natural, and normal family structure. Social power, which is unquestionably given to heterosexual-parented families, reinforces heteronormative and heterosexist beliefs that further stigmatize LGBQTT-parented families in school communities. Queer theory has the potential to destabilize and disrupt both heteronormativity and heterosexism by openly questioning why and how heterosexual-parented families are privileged while LGBQTT-parented families are considered the 'deviant' family structure. Moreover, queer theory can help eliminate the silence surrounding the inclusion of LGBQTT-parented families in school communities. This theory further interrogates the underlying assumption that the two-parent heteronormative family model is a fixed and stable structure. A queer theoretical frame offers school professionals the ability to see how family configuration is fluid and constantly shifting. Recognizing the fluidity of family configurations ultimately weakens the top hierarchal position of heterosexual-parented families. Queer theory also offers an important opportunity to question how homophobia is manifested and thrives within the two-parent heteronormative family model; when one family structure is privileged over another, the irrational fear of the inferior 'other' is justified. A queer theoretical framework has the ability to weaken this fear by highlighting how homophobia is rooted in hegemonic discourse that rewards individuals who conform to the dominant family structure, while punishing families who do not conform to this model.

Queer theory is a useful framework for the research because it situates knowledge, experiences, and perspectives of LGBQTT parents as varied, multiple, and shifting. Such a

perspective contrasts with the idea that identities and experiences are stable, consistent, and predictable.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Methods

Methodology

To facilitate the examination of my research questions, I used a critical qualitative approach that is guided by case study research and narrative inquiry. Merriam's (1998) framework for qualitative research guided this inquiry. She states that "all types of qualitative research are based on the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds" (p. 6). Likewise, Sears (1992) explains that qualitative research is an approach that searches for personal meaning and understanding. Moreover, it is "a willingness to engage and to be engaged, the ability to momentarily stop internal dialogue and to engage reflectively in a search for the meanings constructed by others and ourselves" (p. 152). Consequently, when a researcher approaches a study, the choice of topic, research questions, methodological design, data analysis and interpretations "reflect the values of the researcher" (Sears, 1992, p. 153). Furthermore, this methodology provides an opportunity for communicating stories that are not often told (Morrow, 2003). My primary reason for choosing a qualitative methodology is due to my personal interest in attaining an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perspectives, intentions, and meanings each parent has constructed from their daily interactions within school communities.

Case Study

Gall, Gall, and Borg (2005) claim that researchers who conduct case studies do so in order to describe, explain, or evaluate a specific phenomenon. Nevertheless, a phenomenon has

many aspects; therefore, a particular aspect of the phenomenon must be identified. In this study, the phenomenon of interest is the nature of the interactions of LGBQTT parents in their children's schools. Conducting a case study allows researchers to analyze the holistic and authentic characteristics of real-life events, and enables them to use this information to construct a thick description of the participant's experiences (Stake, 2005; Yin, 1989). Furthermore, the case study approach can provide researchers with the opportunity to more fully understand complex issues, extend experiences, and contribute information to the current literature on the phenomenon (Soy, 1997). Stake (2005) identifies three types of case studies. The intrinsic case study is not used to understand an abstract construct or phenomenon, instead it attempts to put personal curiosities aside and focus on the stories of the individuals who are 'living the case.' The instrumental case study is used to examine a case that can provide insight into a specific issue or contribute to the modification of an existing theory. The multiple case study or collective case study is basically an instrumental case study that extends to numerous cases. In my study, I chose to follow a multiple case study approach. Furthermore, I chose case study methodology because I focused on each participant's experience in school communities as individual cases. By examining each participant's story as its own case or phenomenon, the researcher can first interpret the cases as unique stories before comparing and drawing conclusions between common themes in each case (Patton, 1992). Patton (1992) argues this will enable the researcher to gain a greater understanding of the experience narrated by each participant. Narrative inquiry, the second methodology chosen for this study, adds to the case study by enabling the researcher to hear the participant's stories through their own voices. On the whole, I was interested in listening to the participants' narratives in order to gain depth of understanding of their experiences in their children's schools.

Narrative Inquiry

Chase (2005) describes narrative inquiry as "a way of understanding events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time" (p. 656). When a researcher engages in narrative inquiry, she has made the decision to use personal stories as the basis of her data collection. This method enabled me to critically examine the motives, experiences, and interpretations of the participants' reported actions (Chase, 2005). Aitkens (1993) adds that narrative inquiry:

> renders all participants more vulnerable and, in return, through this relational way of knowing, we glimpse depths of understanding that can only be reached through genuine conversation...[and] trust in the possibility to know more of ourselves – community – than we can hope to know through solitary introspection or reflection. (p. 2)

Ultimately, the objective of narrative inquiry is to reveal the details of life events and why these events occurred as they did from the participants' points of view. Narration enables individuals to organize and connect contrasting parts of their experiences into an integrated whole (Chase, 2005). I thought using narrative inquiry might encourage participants to reflect on decisions they have made regarding their children's schools, allow them an opportunity to tell the stories that have impacted their lives, and make meaning of these personal experiences. This method also allowed me the valuable opportunity to obtain in-depth descriptions and develop an understanding of their experiences as LGBQTT parents.

Also, I chose narrative inquiry as a research methodology for my study because of the lack of Canadian literature that is available on LGBQTT-parented families' experiences in their children's schools. There is a small, but growing, body of literature that is expanding outside of Canada. For instance, Skattebol and Ferfolja's (2007) work contributes to the body of literature

on LGBQTT-parented families by focusing on the experiences of lesbian mothers in Australian early childhood educational settings. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of qualitative studies that attempt to include the voices of LGBQTT parents within school environments, particularly in northern regions and other areas that are isolated from urban LGBQTT communities.

Methods

Research Participants

I was able to recruit six parents for this study. I decided to limit my study to a small number of participants in an attempt to gain a more in-depth understanding of the parent's experiences rather than increasing the number of participants and merely gaining a limited understanding of each family. The selection criteria for this study included individuals who identify as LGBQTT, currently reside in Northern Ontario, and have children presently enrolled in a public school. I also considered parents who have adult children under the age of 21 who were only recently of school age. Intentional and blended family configurations are represented in this study.

The names and brief descriptions of each participant in the study are listed as follows. Names have been changed to pseudonyms and identifying information has been altered to protect the privacy and maintain confidentially of each participant.

Karen

Karen is a single mother of two sons. Zach, her eldest, is 21 years old and lives on his own. Jake, her youngest, is 14 years old and lives at home with her and their two cats. Karen has lived in Northern Ontario all her life. She is a graduate student.

Grace

Grace is in a common-law relationship with her partner of 13 years. They are an intentional family. Grace's partner gave birth to their daughters. Emma, their oldest, is 6 years old, and Chloe, the youngest, is 5 years old. Grace is currently a stay-at-home mother who is taking part-time university studies.

Andrew

Andrew has lived in Northern Ontario for three years. He has one son, Blake, who is 5 years old. Andrew is in the middle of a separation with Blake's other dad, Clee. Once the separation is complete, Blake will see both of his fathers equally. They are also an intentional family. Blake was adopted at birth.

Lisa

Lisa was born and raised in a remote northern community. She has one son, Max, who is 15 years old. She came out of the closet in 2006, and has been in a common-law relationship for the last three years. Lisa is a teacher at a secondary school. They are a blended family.

Alice and Sophie

Alice and Sophie were born and raised in Northern Ontario. They are mothers of five adult children. Their children are now between the ages of 18 and 24. Alice and Sophie have been living together for 21 years, and are now legally married. They are a blended family.

Four of my participants identified as lesbian mothers, one as a two-spirit mother, and another as a gay father. Besides Grace, who is currently completing her undergraduate degree, all of the participants are university educated, working professionals in their respective fields. As for their children, two of the participants currently have one or two children in a primary school, two participants have sons in high school, and the other two participants' children have graduated from high school.

Ethics

Prior to data collection with participants, ethical issues relevant to my research were addressed when I requested formal approval for this study from Lakehead University's Research Ethics Committee. In my initial meeting with each participant, I explained the interview would be audio taped, then transcribed and analyzed for common themes to provide me with insight into their unique experiences. I also reiterated that their participation was strictly voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, and the pervasive reality that the declaration of a homosexual identity is still a highly charged topic that involves a certain amount of risk for potential participants who are 'closeted,' it is critical that I

ensured the confidentiality of all participants. For that reason, the participant's names, along with any identifying information, were altered to maintain privacy and confidentiality.

Recruitment Process

Upon receiving ethics approval, I approached a number of organizations, such as PFLAG[3] in Thunder Bay, Sudbury and Timmins, and Pride Central at Lakehead University, all of which have connections to the target population. I did not receive a response from PFLAG. The director of Pride Central contacted me and agreed to post my advertisement (Appendix A) on their mailing list and put up my poster in the centre. I also posted my advertisement (Appendix A) on PFLAG's, Lakehead University's Pride Central's, Laurentian University's Pride@LU, and Timmins' Gays' and Lesbians' Facebook pages. This method of recruiting yielded limited contacts, so I expanded my search beyond organizations specifically connected to the LGBQTT population. Next, I contacted Lakehead University Communications office and requested my advertisement be posted on their weekly bulletin. Three women contacted me, one stating she was interested in participating and the other two wanting more information about the study. The two women who requested information did not reply to my emails; therefore, they did not participate in this study.

To get the word out about my study further, I also utilized a snowball sampling method (Patton, 1990). I spoke to several people I knew in the LGBQTT communities and asked them if they knew anyone who would be interested in participating. This sampling method is believed to be appropriate for reaching populations that are "closeted" or members of non-dominant cultures (Palys, 2003). Hence, I thought asking LGBQTT people who are aware of the study criteria for

[3] PFLAG used to stand for Parents, Family, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays but is now just known as "PFLAG".

possible contacts might be the best way to obtain "information rich cases" (Patton, 1990, p.176). To also expand my search for participants, I decided to post my advertisement at several local businesses that I believed would be frequented by parents. I was also contacted by a friend who told me my advertisement had been posted in the Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship weekly bulletin. As well, I contacted organizations such as AIDS Thunder Bay that had a monthly newsletter that could potentially advertise my study. I did not have to advertise any further because at this point I began to receive numerous emails from lesbian mothers.

A total of nine mothers had contacted me by this point. Luckily, each email gave me a bit of information on each of the women, which helped me to select my sample. One of the women identified as two-spirit and I therefore immediately made the decision to include her in my study as no one else had identified themselves in that way. Two other women identified as bisexual and currently living in a heterosexual relationship. I chose not to include these women because I felt their interactions within their children's schools would likely be more typical of the experiences of heterosexual mothers, and that they would be attributed as such by school personnel. I did not believe that bisexuality would be noticed or become an issue because they were currently in a relationship with an opposite sex partner. Three women who had originally contacted me expressing their interest in participating did not reply to my email when I asked them to choose a time and place to meet to conduct the interview. I chose to include the other three mothers who contacted me at this point because they fit the criteria set out for this study.

In my research proposal, I originally stated my interest in seeking an equal representation of lesbian mothers and gay fathers to participate in my study. I also stated that, from my experience as a member of the LGBQTT community in a town in Northern Ontario, I predicted that I would have extensive difficulties recruiting gay fathers for my study. My prediction turned

out to be accurate. After successfully recruiting five mothers, I still had not received any emails from gay fathers. To get the word out again, I spoke to another contact in the community specifically stating my need to recruit fathers for my study. I then received an email from one father who stated he was very interested in participating in my study.

A problem I encountered during the recruitment process was that I began to notice all of the individuals who contacted me had already come out of the closet at their children's school. I saw this as problematic for my study because the interactions for out and closeted LGBQTT-parented families in schools could be significantly different. When I read the emails from those who had contacted me, it was obvious they all were comfortable disclosing their sexuality identity and eager to participate in my study. Also, all of the individuals were middle class and university educated. One characteristic that differentiated Lisa from the others was that fact that she is Aboriginal, whereas the other individuals are White. My inability to recruit a diverse group of people, including those who were closeted, of lower socioeconomic status, or visible minorities, resulted in a sample representing a somewhat limited demographic range.

Procedure

Before beginning the interview process, I contacted each participant by email, sent them additional information (Appendix B) on my study, and asked them where they would feel most comfortable meeting. Due to the geographical location of each participant, I concluded at this time that I would be able to complete all interviews in person. I then scheduled an interview date and time with them by email. Four of the participants requested the interview be conducted in their home, whereas the other two participants asked me to choose a location. Therefore, I booked a study room on campus to conduct those two interviews. In order to foster feelings of

trust and reciprocity, I told each participant before beginning each interview that I was open to answering any questions they might have. For three of the interviews, I noticed a level of awkwardness and hesitation that eased as soon as I stated my personal background and reasons for conducting this research. To create an open and trusting relationship, I believe it was crucial that I disclosed my own sexuality identity to my participants. I also explained how I planned to adhere to feminist interviewing ethics, which strive to create an equal partnership between the interviewer and participants. I strove to conduct the interviews in light of Oakley's (1981) observation that, "in interviewing there is no intimacy without reciprocity" (p. 49).

Before beginning the interview process, each participant was given a consent form to sign. Additionally, I emailed a copy of the interview questions to each participant in advance, thereby allowing them the opportunity to reflect on their experiences prior to meeting with me. Data collection for this study involved the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Kvale, 1996). Semi-structured interviews allowed for a moderately open framework that was focused but flexible. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews was most suitable for this study because the format enabled me to alter the sequencing or wording of the interview questions whenever necessary.

All five interviews were audio taped and each ranged between 45 to 60 minutes in length. (Alice and Sophie were interviewed together.) Upon completion of my second interview, I started to notice a pattern. The first two participants found the following question difficult to answer: "Do you believe the size and geographical location of your city or area in Northern Ontario has an effect on your family's experience at school?" In the end, with the exception of Andrew, participants' responses to this question were similar, stating they had nothing to which they could compare their experiences because their children had never been to a school outside

of the current city they were residing. So, from the third interview onwards, I still asked the question but placed less emphasis on it.

Once the interview process was completed, I transcribed each interview. During this process, if any inconsistencies or discrepancies arose, I had intended to contact participants via email for clarification. In the end, I only needed to contact one participant to clarify her response to one question.

Analysis of Data

The data analysis in this study was an ongoing, multi-step process. Merriam (1998) asserts, "Data analysis is not a linear, step-by-step process, data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research" (p. 151). I began to analyze the data following completion of the first interview. Following each interview, I listened to the audiotape, took notes, and then transcribed. I quickly learned how important it is to transcribe each interview while the information was still fresh in my mind. Throughout this process, I constantly made notes regarding emerging ideas, observations, and themes. Charmaz (2000) states, "Memo writing aids us in linking analytic interpretations with empirical reality" (p. 517). The notes I took were especially useful to me once I completed all of the interviews and began to review the transcripts for overlapping themes. After reading and re-reading all of the transcripts, and in two cases listening to the audiotapes again because the participant spoke quickly, I manually colour coded the six overarching themes that emerged from the data. Once I finished the coding, I proceeded to copy and paste the data into separate, theme-titled documents in order to review the data under each theme. In the beginning of the process, the six themes that emerged became obvious to me because every participant addressed each one during their interview.

Chapter 4

Findings and Discussion

To recap, this study was a qualitative exploration of the interactions of LGBQTT-parented families in school communities in Northern Ontario. The data collected from the five interviews were reviewed and organized into themes in order to capture the essence of the experiences described by the six participants. Full narratives of each conversation are not included in this chapter. Instead, I chose to present sections of each narrative that are most relevant to the themes outlined. In this chapter, I will interweave the presentation of the findings with the discussion and interpretation of the themes.

Five major themes were identified during the data analysis: coming out at school; impact of disclosure on their children; acceptance and validation; lack of representation of non-normative families; and high parental involvement. Each theme or pattern identified does not necessarily apply to all the participants. Moreover, I chose to include unique findings that are not necessarily representative of all of the participants but still worthy of contemplation.

Coming out at school

The concept of being "out" in this study focuses on the participant's decision whether to disclose their sexuality identity and family structure to people within the school community. All of the participants stated how important it was to them to come out and openly discuss their family configuration with their child's classroom teacher and the principal of the school. The overall consensus from the participants was that this was the only option. Alice stated firmly, "If you have kids, then you have to come out of the closet, you don't have a choice." According to

the six participants, being open and out at school is the most beneficial option for everyone in the family. Andrew described the approach that he took with the school when his son entered junior kindergarten:

> I basically walked into the principal's office and I said we need to have a discussion. I gave her the lowdown, that Blake has two dads and what my expectations were on how they are to treat him at school. He is not going to feel any different than the kids sitting on either side of him. That's my goal. Anyways, she (the principal) got it, and she was fine. I then spoke to the teacher, she seemed fine as well. For me, I needed to be upfront and set my expectations from the beginning.

Grace described a similar approach to Andrew's. She stated:

> When our oldest daughter started school for the first time, we actually went in and spoke to the teacher, to tell them we are a couple. We believe this was really important so that the teacher would be sensitive to [our daughter]. The teacher was really secure and open, which is how we needed her to be.

During my interview with Sophie and Alice, both mothers spoke adamantly about their beliefs regarding the importance of coming out to everyone at school, so there would not be any misconceptions regarding their new family. Sophie explained:

> Alice and I decided that once we were living together with the kids, we needed to come out and be open about our relationship. So we arranged a meeting with each teacher that first fall, and we told them we're not just living together, we are in a relationship.

Andrew, Grace, Alice, and Sophie's position regarding the importance of full disclosure in their school communities is supported by Ryan and Martin (2000) who agree that it is most advantageous for the family, and whole school community, when LGBQTT parents are open about their family configuration. One of the many benefits of full disclosure is the opportunity for open discussion about family diversity in the classroom. Ryan and Martin (2000) assert that many families choose to keep their family configuration a secret, but families using the private strategy are rarely able to keep their family structure a complete secret. It is more often the child

who accidently outs the parent, which may lead to negative social consequences for the child. Alice explained why she was against keeping her family configuration a secret in her children's school: "when I first came out, I read somewhere that your child should never have to be the one to out you. I took this very seriously and thought to myself if I can't out myself then that's a problem that I need to fix."

Sophie further stated, "I think you need to say it upfront because it's harder for the teacher to react negatively." Even so, Ryan and Martin (2000) warn that full disclosure will not completely eliminate discrimination, and might potentially attract discrimination and harassment. Nevertheless, they believe that visibility will at least create an environment that fosters open communication allowing school personnel and parents to respond to incidents of discrimination and harassment that might occur.

Alice, Sophie, Andrew, and Grace`s decision to come out in their children's schools by scheduling meetings and approaching school staff at the beginning of the year to disclose family structure is consistent with research findings. For instance, a study conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that almost half (48 %) of the 588 parents approached school personnel to openly discuss their family structure with them (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

Karen and Lisa, who have children in high school, had slightly different experiences about coming out at their children's school than Andrew and Grace, who have children in primary school. Karen and Lisa both stated they were out at their children's schools, but unlike Andrew and Grace, who scheduled meetings with the teacher and principal, these mothers took a less direct approach. Since Lisa is a teacher, and is well-known due to her active role in the teachers union, she stated, "I'm in contact with all the elementary and secondary teachers, so yes

they already all know that I'm two-spirit." Lisa went on to explain her thoughts about coming out at her son's school:

> My partner will take him to school sometimes, or if I'm not there she will talk to the principal or whoever. It's not even something that we have to explain. We just go, and [the principal] recognizes her as my partner. And we leave it at that. We don't have to say anything. It's not like a straight parent goes in and says, "I'm straight." I don't need to walk in some place and say, "I'm gay." I just introduce her as my partner, right off the bat wherever we are. We just leave it at that. Sometimes we get the odd stare, but it's, like, whatever, this is how it is.

When Karen spoke about coming out at school, she stated she believed that the level of disclosure can change between primary and secondary school. In high school, students often have more than one teacher, and some parents will actually have less contact with the school community. In the interview, Karen described her own experience: "Yes, I was out, earlier when I was more involved in the school. I don't think I'm out right now to any of Jake's teachers. You know everything changes quickly when they're in high school." One of the reasons why there might be a change in the level of disclosure between primary and secondary school for some parents, although not Karen, is because the secondary school environment is known to be a more hostile setting for children with LGBQTT parents (Sears, 1996). Some parents may feel it is necessary to choose a more private strategy during secondary school to help minimize the chance their children will be harassed or bullied.

The fact that all of the participants believed and practiced full disclosure in their schools could be seen as surprising in light of the academic literature on this issue. Lindsay, Perlesz, Brown, McNair, de Vaus and Pitts (2006), for instance, explain that an LGBQTT parents' decision regarding how, and if, they are going to come out at their child's school is based on several factors. One important factor particularly relevant to this study is how families are more likely to disclose their family structure in schools that are located in open-minded, cosmopolitan,

affluent inner-city suburbs populated by educated middle to upper class citizens. Lindsay and her colleagues (2006) claim communities and demographics around schools have a strong influence on parents' decision and the level of acceptance that they receive within the school community. Moreover, the presence of LGBQTT communities is also an important factor because it increases the chances that other LGBQTT-parented families are already "out" at the school (Lindsay et al., 2006).

In contrast, the communities in which the participants in this study reside are dominated by working class and middle to upper class neighbourhoods populated by conservative, white, Anglophone people. Further, when Karen was asked whether she remembered other LGBQTT parents being present throughout primary and secondary school, she stated:

> First of all, I'm not aware of other LGBQTT families throughout my whole kids' schooling, whether they were closeted or out. But obviously we know they're there, but just not visible. There is not one situation, in my memory, that I can remember.

Alice, Sophie and Grace agreed with Karen's statement that they were also unaware of other LGBQTT-parented families in their children's schools. This indicates that the parents in this study did not feel supported by the presence of other LGBQTT parents, yet this obviously did not factor into their decision to come out in their children's school.

Martin and Ryan (2000) explain there are various reasons for the absence of out families in schools, including those in isolated, Northern Ontario communities. Some parents fear their children will be teased or bullied because they have an LGBQTT parent. As well, other parents might be closeted at their workplace or in their neighbourhoods because they fear their families might face discrimination if they reveal their sexuality identity (Pollack, 1995).

When each of the participants spoke about the importance of coming out in schools, they all stated that one of the significant reasons for doing so was in order to establish a strong partnership between home and school. The six participants spoke about the importance of creating an open and honest relationship with their child's teachers and school principal, thus encouraging open communication and understanding between all parties involved. When Grace was asked whether she believed parent-teacher relationships were important, she stated:

> I think it's very important. I think the teacher needs to know the dynamics within the family, to be able to be positive towards the kids, and be sensitive when they are reading books or doing classroom activities. It's just so important that the teacher and I have a strong relationship. This open communication is most important when the teachers don't know something and they need to ask me a question. It's good when the teacher asks questions, because it shows she is trying to be proactive about my child. Some teachers will actually say they are embarrassed to ask a question, but I tell them not to be, that I'm open to answering any of their questions. I tell them if you're curious, unsure or need clarification, just ask.

When Alice was asked the same question she stated, "It's very important. Generally, I think it's a partnership and teamwork. Parents need to be supportive of the teacher and vice versa. It's about being unified." Epstein (1995) agrees that close partnerships between parents and school communities is critical for various reasons. She emphasized the most important reason for creating such a partnership is to help children succeed in school. As Fullan (1991) asserts, "the closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievement" (p.227).

Nevertheless, as Grace mentioned during her interview, teachers and principals might want to create a strong relationship with LGBQTT-parented families, but feel embarrassed to ask questions. Teachers who are apprehensive about asking questions and who are left with uncertainties on how to proceed with the relationship could have a negative impact on the

development of an open relationship between school personnel and parents. Lindsay et al. (2006) claim the embarrassment that some teachers feel when discussing issues about LGBQTT-parented families may be due to the common misconception that same-sex sexual orientation is more sexually focused than a heterosexual orientation. Ryan and Martin (2000) state that there is a widespread misconception that talking about a parent's sexuality identity is actually a discussion about their sexual behaviour. What people do sexually is private and an inappropriate topic in a primary classroom. For LGBQTT parents, sexuality identity is usually conflated with actual sexuality, but rarely is it so for heterosexual parents.

Another reason why teachers might feel embarrassed about asking questions could be due to their lack of knowledge or understanding on how to meet the needs and address issues that might arise pertaining to LGBQTT-parented families (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992; Martin, 1998). Lipkin (1996) maintains that teachers' ignorance regarding LGBQTT-parented families is not surprising because of the lack of training and education teachers receive about issues related to non-normative families. Therefore, Grace's approach is very important because she tries to educate her child's teacher about LGBQTT-parented families, which hopefully further encourages the teacher to learn by asking questions, and which in turn, creates a strong parent and school partnership.

Moving now to how their children negotiated having out parents, Alice, Sophie, Andrew, and Grace shared similar stories about other children's reaction to news about a child in their class having two moms or two dads. Grace explained how she and her partner address the many questions they receive from children at school:

> So we haven't heard anything negative, but we've heard alot of curiosities. Alot of questions were from our kids' classmates. So if we pick the kids up at school, there are always the very curious ones that pepper us with lots of questions. We

> basically tell them we are mothers, we love each other, we're together, and we have two very lovely kids.

When Andrew is asked the same question, he went on to describe the reaction of the other children in his son's Junior Kindergarten classroom:

> Blake has told me things and they've all been positive. A little guy in Blake's class was crying one day because he only had one dad and Blake had two. One little girl was crying one day because she had a mom and a dad and she really wanted two dads. But really that's been our experience, the kids have been fantastic. They know Clee and I and if they see one without the other, they're, like, 'Where's CleeDad?' because Blake calls Clee 'CleeDad.' So in their eyes they see us as a family unit, because I'm sure their parents haven't talked to them about it, but they just get it.

Casper and Schulz (1999) would agree with Andrew's theory about his son's classmates. The researchers suggest the primary way that children interpret their surroundings is through what they see and what they have been told. This is how children create their own classifications or categories in their minds to make sense of the world they live in. After seeing Blake interact with his dads, the children in Blake's class have obviously come to the conclusion that they are a family because they act like one. Andrew and Clee's behaviour with their son must fit into the category of family perceived by the children. Moreover, as Grace explained, children ask questions in order to construct meaning. It is through these questions that children are able to create a classification system in order to understand the world around them.

Impact of disclosure on their children

Each participant shared similar concerns on how the disclosure of their family structure might impact their children. Grace described how her children are impacted by her decision to disclose their family structure at school. "So far, our daughters haven't had a hard time in school.

Will this change as they get older, I don't know." She explained how her oldest daughter deals with questions and curiosities that her classmates have about her family:

> So when other kids say, "You must have a father," she'll just say, "No, I don't have a father but I have two moms." She'll tell them her mom took special medicine and she was born.

Grace acknowledged several issues arose when her daughter was paired with a reading buddy. Her reading buddy was questioning and arguing with her daughter about her family structure:

> My daughter will basically tell the child, "No, that's not the way it is," when she was repeatedly told everybody has a father. Then she proceeds to explain her family structure to her reading buddy. I don't want my child to always be the teacher educating other kids about diversity. I really just want her to have a nice and regular schooling experience.

Grace understands how her daughter has already encountered the effects of heteronormative discourse in the primary school setting. And her daughter has learned an important lesson that this discourse can be challenged in the classroom. Nevertheless, she explained that the responsibility of teaching family diversity to young children should not be the sole responsibility of her daughter; it is the teacher who needs to actively address and teach the students about diversity when the subject arises during classroom activities and discussions. Lindsay and her colleagues (2006) assert that it is actually not uncommon for very young children to take the lead in challenging and educating their teachers and peers about heteronormative practices.

The six participants held a common fear that their children might be bullied, harassed or stigmatized by their peers because they have same-sex parents. Lisa described her concerns about her son:

> I used to be worried when I dropped him off at school, and I had a pride sticker on my car. Around this time he had been talking about bullying that was going on at school, not to him, but bullying he was seeing. So I was worried and told him that maybe I'll take the sticker off my car because I don't want him to be teased or bullied because of me. And right away he said no. He said, "You are who you are." He's probably been the most supportive of me out of all the people that I've loved and grew up with me.

Karen described similar feelings when asked about the impact on her children:

> I know it's tough to be out as parents in school. I know another woman who is a lesbian and has a daughter in high school and we have to say to our kids, "Are you okay with this? You know I have a diversity flag on the back of my car, are you okay with me?" My younger son is okay with it and really expresses it in the way he presents himself. You know he has a belt with diversity colours on it, he's not afraid to wear pink, and he thinks mom's okay. I don't embarrass him. I'm also always encouraging him and his friends to express themselves the way they are comfortable with.

The concerns expressed by Lisa and Karen are not surprising, given that children of LGBQTT parents may experience ridicule from their classmates due to their family structure and negative stigma that is attached to homosexuality (Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Laird, 1996). Kosciw and Diaz (2008) found that half (51%) of all students with LGBT parents surveyed, reported they felt unsafe in their school during the past school year. The fact that neither Lisa nor Karen's fears have thus far been realized is in itself surprising.

Alice, Sophie, Karen, Grace and Lisa all stated how important it is to keep the lines of communication open between themselves and their children. If problems arise at school, the parents hopefully will know about it, allowing them the opportunity to offer support and guidance to their children. Grace clarified her approach:

> Eventually you might have to make your children aware that they might hear stuff that is really negative about their family. But I believe if the kids are taught self-confidence, this will help them get through it. Also, I'm always telling my daughters that I support them and that I'm there for them whenever they need me.

Sophie explained that, "Whatever comes up and whatever problems might occur at school we will be ready to deal with it with our children. It's so important for the children to know they are supported by their parents." In fact, Litovich and Langhout (2004) found that LGBQTT families were more likely to prepare their children for the possibility of discriminatory treatment and offer support to their children in the event that an incident actually occurs. They also found that lesbian mothers will prepare their children for homophobic interactions in schools by keeping the lines of communication and dialogue about sexuality and diversity open with their children.

Lisa described the positive changes she has seen in her son since she came out of the closet:

> He has become very aware of issues about queers. He has seen the work I've done with the two-spirit youth group I worked with, and he recognizes there is a need for that because of the homophobia he sees in the schools. He sees how a safe space is important for queers. He knows about the high rate of suicide among gay teens. He tells me about the discrimination he sees in school. He is a very compassionate person and he understands how me being out at school could have a negative impact on him, even though it hasn't so far.

These findings are consistent with Anderssen, Amlie, and Ytteroy's (2002) findings that children from LGBQTT-parented families are often more flexible and tolerant than other children. They suggest that some children with LGBQTT parents are more open to diverse ways of thinking and being in the world because their parents encourage tolerance, even in the face of intolerance. Litovich and Langhout (2004) found that parents used instances of homophobic harassment their children or other children faced as opportunities to discuss the issue of intolerance, and ways they can remain tolerant despite the behaviour of others. Furthermore, these parents also discouraged their children from reciprocating the animosity and hatred they have encountered in a homophobic and heterosexist society.

Nevertheless, not all the participants' children were comfortable with other people knowing about their parents' sexuality identity. Sophie described her son's feelings about his mothers being out at school. "I know that Jacob was probably the most apprehensive to talk about it or get upset if people knew about us. He went through quite a period of being embarrassed and ashamed of having lesbian moms." Elia (1993) and Patterson (1992) claim it is during school years that many children of LGBQTT parents are initially exposed to heterosexist norms and homophobia. It is the reactions of others to their family structure that sometimes induces internalized homophobia and social isolation. Lindsay and her colleagues (2006) explain that children of LGBQTT parents use a process of trial and error to personally decide how to manage information about their parents' sexuality identity. Children who experienced discrimination by their peers because of their parents' sexuality identity will sometimes feel humiliated and adopt their own private strategies to manage their everyday life. Moreover, children may avoid or feel apprehensive about discussing their family configuration with their peers because sometimes the sexuality of the parents will be attributed to the child (Ray & Gregory, 2001).

Regardless of the reason why Jacob felt ashamed of having lesbian mothers, Sophie and Alice spoke adamantly that they offered each of their children the support they needed to understand and accept their new family structure. Alice explained, "We took our lead from the kids, we were very open about our relationship but we were also sensitive to their needs." This claim can be interpreted that Alice and Sophie considered the comfort level of their children when making their decision about whether to disclose their family structure or not. I then asked Sophie and Alice if their children were harassed or bullied in school. Sophie replied, "Our children didn't have alot of difficulties at school. I think we were lucky that we had seven

children because they had each other for support." Nevertheless, Sophie remembered one incident that occurred in school that involved one of their daughters:

> To be very honest, we had no problems at all, but I do remember one situation, which we felt was kind of funny. My oldest daughter Samantha, who is a very loud and boisterous type of kid, anyways she would go on and on at school about whatever Mom and Alice were doing. This happened when she was in grade 2, so the teacher called us in for a meeting to speak to us about Samantha's troubling behaviour. The teacher said that we might want to tell Samantha not to speak about us so much at school because she said she was afraid the other kids were going to pick on her, or be nasty to her because of it. So [the teacher] started to tell us about the things she was saying. The teacher's biggest concern was about the fact Samantha was talking about us kissing. Anyways, Alice and I thought about what we should do about this, and we decided why would we tell Samantha to stop talking about us, it's almost like we would be telling her it's not okay that she has lesbian moms and that it's something embarrassing that nobody should talk about. So in the end, we never said anything to her about the meeting. We felt that if she was comfortable with us enough to talk about it freely at school, then why would we stop her. It's great that she feels that good about us. Anyways, she never had a problem at school. Nothing came out of this.

The situation described by Sophie and Alice is a common obstacle that LGBQTT-parented families often encounter in school communities. Ryan and Martin (2000) explain that some teachers will view sexuality identity as a private matter and that any discussion regarding a parent's sexuality identity is not acceptable at school. For example, school personnel might consider common expressions of affection, such as Alice and Sophie kissing, as inappropriate because they are same-sex partners. Ryan and Martin (2000) asserts that LGBQTT parents are often accused of flaunting their sexuality and that parents and children are often highly discouraged by school personnel from talking about sexual orientation in front of other members of the school community. Similar to the circumstances described by Sophie, sometimes teachers will discourage LGBQTT-parented families' openness at school by suggesting that being discreet at school is in the best interest of the child (Martin, 1998). Nevertheless, Sophie and Alice realized that discouraging Samantha from being open about their family structure would

not be in her best interest. Alice and Sophie strongly believed that full disclosure was the best and only option for their family. Moreover, they stated that they believed this incident with Samantha's grade two teacher said more about the teacher's comfort level than Samantha's.

Acceptance and validation

When each of the six participants were asked, "What word best describes your feelings about being a LGBQTT parent in your child's school: accepted, validated, excluded, or marginalized?", they each stated they felt either accepted or validated. Sophie explained her feelings about being a lesbian mother at her children's school:

> I felt accepted and validated right from the very beginning. I never really sensed any negative feedback. One thing that really helped us was the incredible support we received from the daycare. When we first got together some of our kids weren't even in school yet, so we started to bring them to this daycare together. From day one, they were extremely supportive. We couldn't have asked for a better situation.

Karen declared she felt validated as a lesbian mother in the school community. She explained one scenario that reiterated these feelings for her:

> When Zach was in grade 10, my then partner and I went to the school for his IEP review. [The teacher] was very interested in what was going on and wanted to be part of it because we both felt that communication was lacking between home and school. I felt that teacher was very supportive and accepting of us.

Lisa, Andrew, and Grace maintain they all felt accepted in their child's school, but they also expressed caution in their statements. Grace reflected on her first experience coming out to her daughter's teacher; "She was very open, she actually told us she had a previous family who came out to her. She was open, supportive and accepting from the start." Yet Grace still worries about future encounters:

> By and large, it's been a very positive thing. My partner and I feel accepted in our daughter's school. Like I said though, they are only in grade two and [senior kindergarten], so I don't know what it's going to be like later on. I have friends who teach in older grades, and if they get into their class, they will be fine. But we just take it year by year, and we are going to continue to go in positively at the beginning of every year.

Lisa emphasized that acceptance was something she demands: "I think for me as a parent at my child's school, I feel accepted because if I wasn't I would be standing up for myself and I'd make sure that things would change." Similarly, Andrew declared, "I would say [I feel] accepted and validated only because I wouldn't accept anything less. You know if there were any issues I would be dealing with it immediately." As Andrew further reflected on this question, he explained to me how he would cope if he did not feel accepted or validated in Blake's school:

> Initially, I would have a meeting with the teacher, and if that didn't go well, I would then have another meeting but with the principal present. I would then go as far as reminding them of what their responsibilities are in respect to my child. When it comes to the school system, I have some very clear expectations about what they need to provide my son. If the situation still didn't change, I would be the first one to file a human rights complaint. If I've gone through all the right channels and there still isn't any change or improvement, then I will need to take action.

Lisa and Andrew's insistence in protecting and actively supporting their families in the face of potential opposition is consistent with Kosciw and Diaz's (2008) findings. Of the LGBQTT parents surveyed, 67% reported they spoke to their child's teacher regarding their family configuration (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Moreover, parents such as the participants in this study who have fully disclosed their family structure in schools are more likely to speak out against incidents of homophobia in schools. Lisa, Andrew, and Grace acknowledged they are ready to challenge heterosexist and homophobic discourse and practice when they see or hear it.

When Grace was asked about any suggestions she had for other LGBQTT parents she stated, "if you're happy and proud in your relationship, and you consider it [the relationship to be] normal, then don't hide it. I think it will help with feelings of acceptance [in school]. But I don't mean you should wear the [rainbow] flag as you walk through the school because that could be a problem. You don't want to be seen as too out." Epstein and Johnson (1998), and Robinson and Ferfolja (2001) suggest non-normative families' acceptance in schools is often conditional and more likely to occur if the parents are framed as 'good homosexuals.' The 'good homosexual' is one who does not flaunt their sexuality at school and never challenges heteronormative discourse.

As I stated in Chapter 2, queer theory offers a theoretical lens through which to interrogate ideological assumptions about family as stable and coherent, and to examine how heteronormativity and social norms can have a direct impact on LGBQTT-parented families' feelings of acceptance and validation in schools (Bower & Klecka, 2009). Heterosexual-parented families are undeniably the most privileged family structure; therefore, families who fit into the heteronormative family model rarely have to think about whether or not they will be accepted in school communities. Their privilege lies in their ability to unquestionably assume their family configuration is accepted, validated, and even celebrated within school communities. Moreover, queer theory further highlights how one way of being is considered 'normal,' while all other ways of being are considered 'deviant' (Foucault, 1978). Therefore, as Grace advised other parents, acting (or feeling) 'normal' and not being obviously identified as the deviant 'other' is important for ultimately feeling accepted and included in school communities. An LGBQTT parent who is wearing a rainbow flag to school could be considered as openly challenging heteronormativity, and feelings of discomfort may emerge among school professionals and

parents who believe non-heterosexuals are deviant, abnormal, and 'bad' parents because they do not fit into social norms (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008; Smith, 2004).

Andrew and Grace spoke about how feelings of acceptance and validation could change from year to year. These findings suggest the state of acceptance and validation should not be taken for granted. These feelings are unstable and unpredictable. Both participants acknowledged the uncertainty of their families' future acceptance in school communities. As Grace explained, "we take it one day at a time, and just be ready to deal with any problems." This unpredictably is likely increased when LGBQTT parents hear about other LGBQTT parents' difficulties in school communities. During my conversation with Grace, she stated, "I have a friend that told me that I wouldn't have any problems [with homophobic discrimination and harassment] and my family would continue to feel accepted in schools until the kids reach high school." She further stated, "I was told everything would change for the worst once my kids are in high school." The concern the participants expressed about their families being at risk of discrimination or harassment in the future was also found in previous studies conducted by McNair, Dempsey, Wise and Perlesz (2002) and Mercier and Harold (2003). Both studies reported that LGBQTT parents are acutely aware of the risks of full disclosure in their children's schools, recognizing that schools are potential settings of homophobic discrimination (Mercier & Harold, 2003; Skattebol & Ferfolja, 2007).

These findings, highlighted by Andrew and Grace, complement previous research conducted by Oswald and Culton (2003) on life for non-metropolitan LGBQTT people. They suggest that LGBQTT people who live in non-metropolitan regions are likely to directly or indirectly encounter hostility due to the socially and politically conservative climates that characterizes most non-metropolitan communities. It can be assumed that LGBQTT-parented

families who live in communities in Northern Ontario have developed their own strategies that help them navigate and cope with the implications of raising a family in a potentially hostile climate. On the other hand, LGBQTT-parented families who live in larger Canadian cities where 'gay ghettos' are more likely to exist might not need to develop coping strategies because the level of acceptance for LGBQTT-parented families may be higher. Nevertheless, homophobia and hostile climates exist in all communities, regardless of the size and geographical location. The hostility towards LGBQTT-parented families might not be as obvious in larger cities because the large population reduces the likelihood that homophobia and anti-LGBQTT rhetoric dominates the public climate. As Grace described, her family's experiences at school could change any year. She copes with this risk by proceeding with optimism, but with heightened vigilance, at the beginning of every year because she is preparing herself for any issues that non-normative families often encounter within heteronormative institutions.

Although Lisa stated she felt validated and accepted as a two-spirit mother in her son's school, as an Aboriginal woman she felt marginalized in school communities:

> I think that as an Aboriginal person I felt more marginalized. Not as a queer [person]. I haven't received alot of discrimination because I'm gay. But I can decide not to tell people if I wanted to. But I recognize right away the discrimination that I face because I'm Ojibway. I know this for sure. It's really obvious.

For Lisa, racism is a mundane but persistent form of discrimination. Her statement suggests that because her sexuality identity makes her part of an (often) invisible minority, unlike her race which is visible, she may choose not to disclose her sexuality identity in threatening situations. Non-disclosure about her status as an Aboriginal person is not an option. Therefore, she is subjected to the many negatives effects of racism experienced by Aboriginal people. Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black, and Burkholder (2003) supports Lisa's view that racism is a more

profound stressor for visible minority women. These researchers claim that "triple jeopardy," the intersection of racism, sexism and heterosexism, is a persistent stressor that women such as Lisa experience in their daily lives.

I also asked the six participants what experiences or events occurred that led them to feel accepted and validated in their child's school. Grace quickly responded to my question by stating:

> One way I know I'm accepted by my child's teacher is when I ask to volunteer in their classroom and I actually go into the classroom and volunteer. As far as I'm concerned, if they didn't want me there they would've said "no we can't fit you in." I'm actually welcomed into both their classrooms just like any other parent is. The teachers don't treat me any differently.

Grace's belief that her presence in her daughter's classroom contributed to an overall feeling of acceptance in the school community are consistent with Kosciw and Diaz's (2008) findings. They found that LGBQTT parents who felt excluded in their child's school were less likely to volunteer at the school and participate in parent-teacher organizations (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). The mere presence of an LGBQTT parent signifies school acceptance and validation of LGBQTT-parented families, as well as solidifies continued support for the visibility of diverse families within the school community. The participation of LGBQTT parents in the classroom also demonstrates to their children that the school is accepting of their family structure. This is an equally validating experience for the parents and their children (Mercier & Harold, 2003).

Sophie, Alice, Karen and Andrew explained how they felt that self-acceptance and pride were significant factors that played a partial role in helping them feel validated and accepted in their children's school. Alice explained her response to this question:

> I think some of these feelings about being accepted actually comes from within. You know when we first realized we wanted to be more than housewife friends, I was 32 and Sophie was 30. We were mature and older. We each had a good life

> before that point, we were also both well educated. We felt like we were good people. And then all of a sudden this thing hit us and just turned a really sharp corner in our lives and then carried on. We still felt like we were good people, we were just not straight anymore. I felt like I accepted me, I feel content and satisfied with myself and I didn't need anyone else's validation.

Sophie emphasized that she shared the same feelings as Alice on this issue. She stressed, "I know who I am, I'm proud and I'm satisfied. I'm just happy that I know the real me."

Andrew explained his response:

> I know there was definitely a time that I renounced my sexual orientation; you know I wasn't happy about it. Initially, I resisted it. But, to be quite frank, once I became okay with it, not that I sing it to the world because I don't do that either, you know I'm just okay with me, and I don't really care what other people think. Having that confidence, maturity, wisdom, or knowledge or everything rolled into one, this helps you when you're out in the world. I'm happy with me. I'm at the point in my life that I think if somebody doesn't like me then that's too bad for them. So I largely think when people are confident in that respect, that you're basically setting your expectations for how people will treat you.

Karen echoed similar feelings:

> I think that feeling accepted and validated as a gay parent in schools has alot to do with the individuals themselves. If you're out and proud, and it's just a matter of fact [that you're gay], you're not uncomfortable with it or closeted then people around you will feed off of that. It's just a fact of life, and not a big deal. So it's not about being shame based or fearful of homophobia.

Sophie, Alice, Karen and Andrew's feelings of accepting their homosexual identity are consistent with Troiden's four-stage model of homosexual identity formation (Troiden, 1988). The four participants' narratives fit into Troiden's final stage of the identity development model. The fourth-stage of this model involves the adoption of homosexuality as a way of life. This is noticeable in the adoption of a same-sex relationship and indicated by "self-acceptance and comfort with the homosexual identity and role" (p. 54). Sophie, Alice and Andrew described several internal and external factors outlined in Troiden's identity development model that further emphasized their acceptance of and pride in their homosexual identity. Troiden identifies

several internal factors most common in the final stage. One factor pertains to the participants' feelings after acknowledging their homosexual identity as a valid part of their lives, that is, increased feelings of happiness and satisfaction upon reaching this conclusion. Several external factors identified by Troiden, such as full disclosure of homosexual identity and a shift in stigma management strategies, were used by the participants. Andrew, Alice and Sophie described how they no longer use forms of denial, blending and covering as stigma management strategies. The four participants suggest their feelings of self-acceptance and comfort about their sexuality identity has partially contributed to their feelings of acceptance within their children's school. From these findings, one could assume that the more secure a parent feels about their sexual identity development, the more likely they will feel accepted within school communities.

When the participants were asked if they believed the size and geographical location of their community in Northern Ontario had an effect on their family's experiences at school, Andrew was the only participant who answered the question. The other participants stated they could not answer the question because they had resided in their current community for the majority of their lives and essentially they had no other residency circumstances by which to compare their experiences. Andrew explained his response:

> Having lived in Montreal, which is a very inclusive, diverse community with lots of support for the gay and lesbian community, [then] having moved here [Northern Ontario], I was shocked to see the size of this place and the lack of gay-owned or gay-friendly businesses. So far I've seen one rainbow flag. That's a problem. So then I think why? What comes to mind is the demographics of the city. We have an aging population, lots of boomers and traditionalists, younger people often leave for work elsewhere. I think the biggest issue, apart from age, is cultural. There is a large number of Italians, so that means there is a very large Catholic base here. So I think this contributes to the conservative climate here in [Northern Ontario]. But keep in mind, I have to be honest, even though from what I see out in the community and that the conditions are ripe for discrimination against gays, I haven't personally experienced any of this. I've interacted with my

> in-laws, their friends, friends of friends, everyone knows about our family, and we've never had a problem at school or anywhere.

Andrew sees his community as conservative and potentially hostile towards LGBQTT people and he admits he has heard and witnessed incidents of homophobic harassment and discrimination since he arrived in Northern Ontario. Given this, one could predict that schools in this area would not be accepting and tolerant of the inclusion of LGBQTT-parented families. Nonetheless, Andrew and the five participants indicate that their school experiences have not mirrored the conservative, culturally traditional environment of Northern Ontario. Lindsay and her colleagues (2006) assert that climate, demographics and social contexts in the community often have a connection to the level of tolerance and acceptance that school communities have for LGBQTT people. This study's findings are not consistent with such findings.

Lack of representation of non-normative families

All six participants voiced similar concerns about the lack of representation of their families in their children's school. Each participant discussed their belief that the lack of representation of diverse family structures in the curriculum was detrimental to the creation of an inclusive school environment for their families. When Lisa was asked whether she has seen any representations of LGBQTT-parented families in the curriculum, she stated "when I was teaching a law course at the secondary level, it was brought up during the human rights section. Besides this, I haven't seen anything in the curriculum about gays and lesbians." Karen shared Lisa's opinion, emphatically stating, "absolutely not. I don't even need to think about this question. Throughout the entire schooling of both my sons I've never seen anything in the curriculum about gay and lesbian people." Grace also discussed lack of curriculum that

recognizes LGBQTT-parented families, but she did mention one situation when one teacher asked her for materials she could use in the classroom:

> Actually the teachers asked us if we had any books we could bring in for her to read and display in the reading corner. She asked for books about families. This first happened when our oldest daughter was in SK [senior kindergarten]. The teacher did a little unit on families for a couple weeks, and that's why she had asked for books. Also, our kids are in French immersion, and the books we gave weren't in French, so they actually went as far as trying to get French copies of the books to show in the class.

When Karen was asked why she believes there is a lack of LGBQTT representation in the curriculum, she stated, "[the teachers] fear the reaction from parents." She explained:

> In many conversations with educators what I really notice, and is a guiding theme over and over again, is that [the teachers] are more concerned about the backlash from parents and getting in trouble with administration and fear getting that blue slip. They're not concerned about human rights, equity issues, and including GLBT curriculum in their classes. It's getting into trouble.

Sophie and Alice stated they believed that teachers "just don't want to touch [the discussion of LGBQTT-parented families]". Alice explained, "some teachers are just afraid to approach the subject. I also think alot of them just don't understand it, and partially I think some hold their own biased beliefs."

My findings on the limited representations of LGBQTT-parented families in the curriculum are consistent with the literature (such as Lindsay et al., 2006; Lipkin, 1996; Ryan & Martin, 2000; Skattebol & Ferfolja, 2007). As I noted earlier in this chapter, many teachers avoid using any materials or discussions about non-normative families in their classroom. Sears (1996) claims that the inclusion of LGBQTT topics in the classroom is still considered too radical by many educators. As explained by three of the participants, some teachers choose to avoid including literature and having discussions about LGBQTT-parented families because of their

own fears and misconceptions (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007). Teachers may be uncomfortable discussing any issues related to LGBQTT people, fear other parents' reactions, or do not know how to approach such discussions with children (Lai, 2006). As described by Karen, some teachers are afraid of being criticized or reprimanded by administration (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Walton, 2005).

Nevertheless, as Grace's narrative highlights, there is a small minority of teachers who try to include LGBQTT-parented families in their lessons. Some teachers challenge the current heterosexist curriculum by making micro-revolutionary changes, small but important transformations, in their classroom curricula (Birden, 2002; Lucas, 2004). Still, Alice, Sophie, Karen, and Andrew indicated that their children's teachers have not always been comfortable when given the opportunity to discuss and display non-normative families in their classroom. Sophie, for instance, stated:

> Something that always bothered me was they would do this unit on families and this was when it became very clear if [the teacher] felt uncomfortable on how to represent our family. So they would typically, the [teachers] who were the least comfortable, would obviously struggle not knowing what to do. For example, Samantha's family would be presented with her dad, step mom, and step brothers. Our kids wouldn't be in the picture. That bothered me when the teacher did this because they all knew about our family. Sometimes I felt like some teachers just wanted [our family] to be like everyone else's. You know the picture, one mom, one dad, and their own brother and sister.

Similarly, Alice described her feelings about the awkwardness that she saw in some of her children's teachers:

> One time the kids had to do their family tree for a lesson. So the branches on the tree were going all over because that's how big of a family they had. I remember this was obviously uncomfortable for the teacher that year. You got the feeling from some teachers that they were okay with our family until it became more obvious to others.

The feelings of discomfort the participants identified in some teachers when confronted with a situation that pushed them to think beyond the two-parent heteronormative model is supported by Skattebol and Ferfolja (2007). Teachers who continue to assume that families consist of one mother and one father hinder the opportunity to fully include children from LGBQTT-parented families in their classrooms. Andrew mentioned a troubling incident that occurred when a gay couple he knows sent their son to school with a book the teacher thought was unacceptable:

> So their little guy brought his favourite book to school one day *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dad.* [The school] made him return it. They wouldn't let him keep it at school because the teacher didn't feel that it was appropriate. This created alot of problems with the school. Come on, it's a child's book! It talks about diversity. Kids need to learn about this when they're young. This created alot of bad feeling between both parties. This couple has told me they've had problems [with the school] ever since.

Andrew's narrative demonstrates what might happen when school communities resist the inclusion of non-normative families in the curriculum and the classroom. Researchers would agree that teaching tolerance and understanding of diverse family structures can never start too early (Lai, 2006; Solomon, 2004; Wolfe, 2006). Willis (2004) claims that children's prejudicial attitudes are often constructed during the early years; therefore, schools need to include books, such as *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads* (Valentine, 1994), so that discussions about tolerance and family diversity can combat the misinformation, prejudice, and negative stereotypes that are prevalent in a heterosexist, homophobic society. Schools that do not want to include books on LGBQTT-parented families are ignoring an important chance to develop feelings of tolerance and acceptance among their students (Moita-Lopes, 2006). Nonetheless, Lisa made an interesting point when she was asked what her beliefs were about including LGBQTT issues in the curriculum:

> The diversity committee did a good job and got a few books out there [in the schools] but that is not even close to being enough. You just can't throw books into a school library and expect people are going to read them. In my experience in giving people Aboriginal books, well, they don't feel comfortable teaching it, so then we provide them with cultural teachings courses. Great! Now they feel more comfortable, and more knowledgeable about the culture. You know they need the training to get past their prejudices. Books [aren't] going to cure everything but giving people the opportunity to learn about a certain culture, history, and the people's struggles, so they can become aware and feel comfortable including it in their teachings. So getting the books out there is a good start, but only the beginning.

Overby and Barth (2002) agree that LGBQTT cultural training may help with the implementation of LGBQTT themes in schools by increasing awareness and understanding among parents and teachers. As Lisa stated, teachers who are uncomfortable and uneducated about LGBQTT-parented families need to be offered an opportunity through education and training to learn how to deal with their feelings of discomfort. Cultural proficiency training enables teachers to learn the facts about LGBQTT people and dispel the myths and misconceptions (Solomon, 2004).

Ultimately, acceptance of others requires tolerance, sensitivity, and cultural awareness training (Sogunro, 2001). Researchers have stated that training about the contact theory hypothesis should be incorporated into professional development. Basset, vanNikkelen-Kuyper, Johnson, Miller, Carter, and Grimm (2005) claim that specific factors within the contact theory hypothesis reduced discrimination against LGBQTT people, namely the acceptance of a biological explanation for homosexuality, enrolling and participating in diversity courses, listening to LGBQTT guest speakers, knowing LGBQTT people, and watching documentaries that addressed the prejudice against LGBQTT people. Basset and colleagues (2005) suggest that school boards need to put the contact theory hypothesis into practice by implementing cultural proficiency training which focuses on LGBQTT-parented families, the experiences of LGBQTT

youth in schools, homophobia, and real life experiences of LGBQTT people including statistics about hate crimes and suicides among LGBQTT youth. Including the contact theory hypothesis in training sessions provides teachers a valuable opportunity to learn how negative and biased beliefs about LGBQTT people are based on fear, along with a lack of knowledge and understanding.

Other training that researchers claim should be provided to further the inclusion of LGBQTT-parented families in schools is introducing teachers to critical pedagogy theory during professional development seminars. Critical pedagogy "seeks to understand and critique the historical and socio-political context of schooling and to develop pedagogical practices that aim not only to change the nature of schooling, but wider society" (Crookes & Lehner, 1998). Chen (2005) asserts that critical pedagogy training enables teachers to question mainstream culture, counteract biased and discriminatory ideas, and help marginalized groups in society. Once teachers understand that LGBQTT people are an oppressed and underrepresented minority group (Sears, 1996), they may be more likely to understand how important it is that LGBQTT-parented families are represented within their classrooms.

Within critical pedagogy, queer pedagogy can complement the above strategies. According to Bryson and de Castell (1993) queer pedagogy is "a radical form of educative praxis implemented deliberately to interfere with, to intervene in, the production of 'normalcy' in schooled subjects" (p. 285). It has the potential to create micro-revolutionary change within the school curriculum. Thus, queer pedagogy is about deconstructing and critically unpacking values and assumptions that are ingrained in normalized discourses (Robinson, 2007). More specifically, it challenges teachers to ask questions in order to disrupt cultural binaries, such as male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, that are embedded in these discourses

(Robinson, 2007). Queer pedagogy offers educators an opportunity to teach children about family diversity through a critical theoretical lens. It is by identifying how the two-parent heteronormative family model is a performance, which has been normalized and reinforced by ingrained, hegemonic gender and sexuality roles, that queer pedagogy can begin to disrupt the cultural binaries that ultimately exclude and marginalize families who do not fit into the heteronormative model. For instance, the deconstruction of the heteronormative family could involve teaching children about the unequal power relations inherent within the socially constructed view that mothers are subservient, quiet, and nurturing, whereas fathers are strong, hardworking, and the authoritarian figure in the family. Ultimately, queer pedagogy has the potential to create more inclusive school communities by acknowledging and normalizing diverse family structures.

Apart from the curriculum, Andrew, Sophie, Alice, and Grace discussed concerns about lack of inclusion and sensitivity towards their families during Mother's and Father's day celebrations. They expressed their bewilderment that schools still celebrate these events despite creating feelings of exclusion and isolation for children who are from families not represented in the celebration. Andrew described his apprehensions about school celebrating Mother's day:

> [When] I think of exclusion I think about Mother's day celebrations at Blake's school. It was a big hoopla this makes me wonder how inclusive schools really are. Let's face it, the reality is children today are being raised by grandparents, aunts, uncles, foster parents, adoptive parents, single parents and same-sex parents. So the point I was trying to make to the schools was they really need to start asking themselves if they should be celebrating events that excluded a vast majority of their students.

Andrew then described the first Mother's day event he experienced at Blake's school:

> The school had a tea and Blake brought his grandmother, but of course there was a Mother's day song, and then it was mom this and mom that. So then it was obvious that some kids were getting really sad because they didn't have anybody

> there with them and they were doing all this stuff about mom, and mom wasn't there. Alot of mom's work so they can't go to the tea. So to me, I see that this is isolating and putting undue stress on the child. Let's think, is this really what education is about, making kids feel excluded?

Sophie and Alice both described similar concerns about Mother's day celebrations at school. Sophie mentioned,

> I have big issues with school celebrating mother's day teas during the day. It really upsets and hurts the kids unnecessarily. Even worse is that schools seem to ignore the fact that some kids don't have a mom or a dad. How do they think this makes these kids feel? Again schools are not representing all families.

Casper and Schulz (1999) acknowledge that in order for schools to become inclusive of LGBQTT-parented families, they need to be extra sensitive and increase awareness during Mother's and Father's day celebrations. Undoubtedly, teachers often exclude and isolate children from LGBQTT-parented families during these celebrations. Grace made similar suggestions to Casper and Schultz (1999) on how to avoid excluding LGBQTT-parented families without having to resort to cancelling the Mother's and Father's day celebrations in school. Grace explained, "[the] teacher asked us what we wanted to do for Father's day. I just told her [my daughter] can make a card for [her grandfather]." Casper and Schultz (1999) argue that teachers need to be proactive and ask the parents before these celebrations what accommodations need to be made for the child. Moreover, it is important for teachers to consider the diverse family structures in their class and make the celebrations fit for each family. For example, Andrew and Sophie mention the sadness some children with working mother's feel at events held in school during the day. As well, Casper and Schultz (1999) emphasize that teachers need to stretch the usual meaning of Mother's Day and Father's Day to include any male or female figure in the child's life. Grace demonstrated this by suggesting her daughter make a card for her grandfather.

High Parental Involvement

Each of the participants emphasized the importance of their consistent participation in their child's classroom and school community. Grace stated, "My partner is on the parent council, and I volunteer in our daughter's classrooms. We're both really involved." When Karen was asked about her involvement, she explained, "I was always very involved in their school during the primary years, I went to all the Christmas parties and all the parent-teacher meetings." Sophie and Alice both stated that they were on the parent council while their children were in elementary school. Sophie described one of the reasons why being involved in the school community was essential to her:

> Participating in the parents council and going into the schools [to volunteer] is so important. Your kids need to see you're involved and part of their lives. And if you don't go out and do anything because you might be afraid, then I think you are going to feel excluded in the school.

The finding from this study on the high level of involvement of the parents in school communities is consistent with research findings by Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, and Smith (1986) and Mercier and Harold (2003). These researchers have found that lesbian parents are highly likely to be involved in their children's school by volunteering, attending parent-teacher meetings, classroom and whole school celebrations, and contacting the teacher about their child's academic performance. They characterized lesbian mothers as politically involved, self-confident, and eager to assume leadership roles (Green et al., 1986; Mercier & Harold, 2003). The increased involvement of LGBQTT-parented families in school communities may be related to their need to stay visible, thereby demonstrating they are a family through asserting their parenting roles in their child's school. Moreover, they might be involved in their child's school

because of their own need to increase understanding and awareness of LGBQTT-parented families.

The significant involvement of this study's participants in school communities clearly supports the claim of Mercier and Harold (2003) that LGBQTT parents are highly committed to their children. This point is further emphasized by Sophie's statement about the need for her children to see their mother's involvement in their school lives. Also, LGBQTT-parented families can easily be ignored in school communities, and Sophie and Alice worked to avoid this outcome and assist in creating an inclusive school environment. Besides contributing to an inclusive school environment, Lindsay and colleagues (2006) claim that the presence of involved LGBQTT-parented families in schools helps foster a more inclusive, safe environment for their children. Furthermore, children are more likely to report positive experiences in both the classroom and the schoolyard, as opposed to children in more conservative schools where LGBQTT parents are closeted and not involved in the school. Alice and Sophie are correct when they state that their presence in the school is important for the well-being of the children.

Andrew described his significant involvement in Blake's school, and how he felt his presence in the school was perceived by teachers and parents:

> I've had alot of involvement and daily interactions [in the school]. I often hang around, observing, watching, and helping out. I'm hugely involved in Blake's schooling. There were three teacher changes last year. So because of these changes I probably spent even more time there than I normally would. The transition process was tough for Blake. During this time, I got to know a ton of parents and I can honestly say we've had not one bad experience. Being part of their school has been great. Clee and I had this conversation that because I'm much more out and okay with myself than he is, that I'm actually way more involved [in the school] than he is. Like he would never introduce me as his partner or boyfriend. He's not comfortable with that.

This data suggests that parents who are comfortable being 'out' and open about their sexuality identity may be more likely to be involved in the school community. As Andrew states, his openness has enabled him to create a close relationship with Blake's teacher and other children's parents. Yet, he acknowledged that his partner, Clee, who is not as comfortable with his sexual identity, is not as involved in their son's school. He believes this is one of the reasons for Clee's lack of involvement in their son's school. Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1987) have theorized why some gay fathers might be more involved in their children's life than others. They suggest the level of paternal involvement is influenced by four factors: motivation, skills and self-confidence, social supports, and institutional factors or practices. Motivation is, in turn, influenced by the father's developmental history, age, marital status, personality characteristics including gender-role orientation, self-esteem, and self-identity (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987). Therefore, there are several possible reasons for Clee's apprehensions about being involved in Blake's school. Nevertheless, regardless of the type of involvement, it is clear that parental involvement in a child's school is important and has positive effects on the family (Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2006). Andrew mentioned that Clee spends enough time picking Blake up at school that the children know him and describe Andrew, Clee, and Blake as a family.

These findings also suggest that Andrew understands the benefits of full disclosure of his family structure, which helps to create a home-school partnership. His involvement in classroom activities makes him available to answer any questions teachers have and deal with any issues that might arise. Andrew also claimed, "[other] parents need to see me active and involved [in the classroom] so they don't see [our family] as any different as theirs." This claim suggests that LGBQTT parents' involvement in the school provides a means for normalizing their relationship in a heteronormative environment. LGBQTT parents who are involved in school communities

normalize their family structure by being visible and serving as a parent of a child along with all the other parents. Besides Andrew, the five other participants stated they believed that normalizing their family structure by being involved was seen as a powerful and effective way of developing a positive relationship between home and school.

Alice raised a compelling point when she discussed how her and Sophie's high level of involvement changed when their children entered secondary school. Alice explained, "there aren't as many chances to participate in your child's schooling when they reach high school." These findings mirror Bogenschneider and Johnson's (2004) observation that parental involvement is highest in elementary school, whereas the level of involvement decreases significantly in middle and high school. However, parental involvement is necessary and beneficial in all levels of schooling (Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2006). Lisa commented about limited opportunities for parental involvement at the secondary level, but focused on the importance of LGBQTT –parented families to still find a way to get involved. She agrees with the research on the need for parental involvement in all levels of schooling, and highlighted changes that need to be made:

> As a parent [of a child in high school], there is nothing for gay parents to allow them to be involved. There needs to be a PFLAG. I know they just started a GSA [Gay Straight Alliance] and I think that's awesome but [the schools] need to be more proactive in creating a safe space for gay parents to participate and connect with the schools. I don't think there is enough being done. I know there is a diversity committee at the board and the GSA's but that's not enough. We need more people who are queer. Gay parents need to organize and find a way to be visible in high schools. I think their presence could make the schools a safer place for queer youth. It's awesome to have straight people to lead GSA's, but let's be honest, they don't understand what it's like being queer.

These claims suggest that LGBQTT parents need to find ways to become involved in secondary schools given parents' participation is important in fostering a safer school climate for their children and LGBQTT youth.

When Andrew, Karen and Lisa were asked if they participated in their child's schools, they adamantly spoke about their support and active involvement in organizations that strive to increase equity for LGBQTT parents and youth in schools. Each discussed how they were involved as parents, but also their membership on school diversity committees, leadership in GSA groups, and one as an elected chair of the teachers union to increase equity and social justice for all marginalized groups in schools. These three participants held strong opinions regarding the need for increased participation of LGBQTT people in school communities. Karen explained one of the reasons she is doing organizational work:

> [I am involved as] co-ordinator of a GSA working with LGBQTT youth and through my work doing presentation and raising awareness about LGBQTT people in schools. This is all really important to me. Honestly, I don't feel excluded as a lesbian parent but I seriously see marginalization and exclusion in schools on so many levels. More LGBQTT people need to get involved. Homophobia in high schools needs to be addressed.

Karen is clearly concerned by the marginalization of LGBQTT youth in schools and compelled to raise awareness by educating school communities about the unsafe, oppressive, conditions that LGBQTT youth and parents often encounter within school communities. The determination that Lisa and Karen display in their activist work in schools is comparable to Short's (2007) assertion that lesbian mothers are likely to report a sense of social responsibility and pride in being part of a social group that works to resist discrimination and challenge oppressive systems.

Summary

In the first theme, 'coming out at school,' it was clear that each participant believed that full disclosure of their sexuality identity was extremely important. One reason the participants chose to fully disclose was in order to support their children; in turn, this enabled them to develop open and honest relationships with school professionals. Yet some LGBQTT parents are in a stronger position than others to come out at school. For instance, Grace, Andrew, Alice, and Sophie were all in relationships and had the support of their partners when they decided to fully disclose their family structure at school. They felt the need to come out and model not only to their children, but other members of the school community, that sexuality identity is not a shameful secret.

The participants were acutely aware of the possibility of a homophobic reaction to their being out. There is a great likelihood of this reaction in Northern Ontario in the small communities and the larger centres such as Sudbury and Thunder Bay, all of which can be characterized as generally socially and politically conservative communities. If a hostile reaction to families coming out in schools were to occur, many would have to deal with this in an environment that lacks the LGBQTT resources and physical space to unify LGBQTT people together to rally support for the family that exists in larger urban centres. The lack of formal organization in communities in Northern Ontario suggests that LGBQTT people are generally less visible to others and less likely to find support that can be found within the 'gay ghettos' of larger cities. Nevertheless, the participants decided that the positive implications of coming out far outweighed the negative possibilities. Additionally, the participants' sense of pride could strongly contribute to the resilience of their children, who demonstrated similar feelings of pride about their family configuration. These feelings might not have developed if the parents had chosen not to disclose their sexuality identity in school communities.

The second theme, 'the impact of disclosure on their children,' was an issue that each participant was concerned about. It is clear that the participants were aware of the possible negative repercussions regarding the disclosure of their sexuality identity directly on the lives of their children. Underlying this issue was a fear or acknowledgment that disclosure of the child's family configuration could be especially difficult at the secondary school level. Apprehensions about the future were voiced by Andrew and Grace, whose children were still in the early primary years. It can be assumed these fears might have originated from stories they have heard from other LGBQTT people. The acknowledgement that children of LGBQTT parents might have a more difficult time at the secondary level also came from Lisa, Karen, Alice and Sophie. Although these four participants did not report any incidents of harassment or abuse suffered by their children due to their sexuality identity, they were still aware of the potential risks. All the participants voiced the importance of creating a 'united front' to support their families in heteronormative school communities. Creating a 'united front' may be even more important for LGBQTT-parented families in school communities in Northern Ontario. The lack of supportive LGBQTT resources and inter-connected networks of LGBQTT-parented families heightens the need for families to speak out and unconditionally support their children and each other. The participants spoke adamantly about protecting their children by advocating for them and the rights of their family. It can be assumed the participants in this study were ready to speak out and support their children in schools despite being aware that being labelled as the 'other' and being a member of a family that is not constituted within the two-parent heteronormative model could put their children at risk of harassment and abuse.

The third theme, 'acceptance and validation,' was also discussed by each participant. From the findings, it is obvious the parents' feelings of acceptance and validation came from

their interactions with teachers and principals. It was during meetings with school professionals that these feelings were able to develop. Thus, the participants expressed how the school professionals acknowledged, accepted, and respected their family configuration. This provided the participants confidence and security because they felt their children were in a school that was supportive of their family. Other issues could be assumed to contribute to the parents' feelings of acceptance and validation in schools. For instance, all the parents described their strength, motivation, and determination to accept nothing less than full acceptance of their families. They also discussed the importance of self-acceptance. As Alice stated, "I accept myself, and that is the only acceptance that I need." Nevertheless, acceptance and validation from school personnel seem to be conditional and limited to interactions with school professionals. Acceptance of LGBQTT-parented families diminished when teachers were given an opportunity to represent LGBQTT-parented families in the curriculum or classroom activities. Feelings of discomfort became obvious in these situations, increasing the potential for difficult relations between the teacher and parent. Such opportunities and discomfort indicate that acceptance and validation of LGBQTT-parented families is conditional depending on the circumstances. The fragility and unpredictably of LGBQTT-parents' families being accepted in school communities is an issue with which heterosexual parents do not have to contend. Thus, heterosexual parents in heteronormative school communities are unquestionably given acceptance and validation because their family structure is normalized.

The fourth theme, 'lack of representation of non-normative families,' partially led to the participants' feelings of exclusion in school communities. Several of the participants found that many teachers who were challenged to think beyond the two-parent heteronormative model felt uncomfortable and often chose not to include representations of non-normative families in their

teaching. Through a queer theory lens, this omission of LGBQTT-parented families in the curriculum highlights how teachers reinforce heteronormative ideals, including 'normal' and 'deviant' parenting. Again, heterosexual-parented families are normalized, while LGBQTT parents are covertly and at times overtly labelled as deviant and therefore excluded from the curriculum. Thus, parents who fit into the fixed, stable, and normalized description of a family are privileged, thereby marginalizing LGBQTT-parented families who do not conform to the heteronormative family model. The overall consensus was that the exclusion of LGBQTT-parented families in the curriculum was not conducive to the creation of an inclusive school community.

The last theme, 'high parental involvement,' was suggested by the participants to have several positive effects on their family. For one, parents' high level of involvement possibly assisted in fostering feelings of acceptance for their family. It was described as important for children to see their parents involved like other parents in the school. The participation of LGBQTT-parented families normalizes diverse family structures for all children. Additionally, the participants believed that more LGBQTT people need to get involved and be visible in school communities. The involvement of LGBQTT parents in schools may be even more crucial in school communities in Northern Ontario. For instance, it is more likely, due to lower LGBQTT populations in non-metropolitan regions, that school professionals in Northern Ontario schools have never met an LGBQTT-parented family who practised full disclosure in their school. High parental involvement could normalize their family structure among school professionals. As well, being not only out but also being involved in the school community may assist other LGBQTT-parented families in being more comfortable in fully disclosing their family structure. Increasing the visibility of LGBQTT-parented families in schools through high

participation has the potential to increase the acceptance and inclusion of LGBQTT-parented families in schools in Northern Ontario.

Chapter 5

Recommendations and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to learn about the nature of the interactions between LGBQTT parents and their children's teachers and school principals in school communities in Northern Ontario. As previously discussed, the experiences of LGBQTT-parented families in isolated communities in Northern Ontario are not significantly different from the experiences of LGBQTT-parented families in larger cities. The participants in the study highlighted how some school communities in small isolated communities in Northern Ontario have the potential to be accepting and supportive of LGBQTT-parented families. These findings challenge the common assumption that people in small towns are more homophobic than those in cities. Homophobia, heteronormativity, and heterosexism are common problems which persist in school communities in both rural and urban areas.

Historically, heteronormative school communities have continued to reproduce dominant ideologies and cultural norms, such as homophobia and heterosexism, which contributed to the oppression and marginalization of LGBQTT people. Kosciw and Diaz (2008) maintain LGBQTT parents and their children are at risk of stigmatization and abuse in school communities. The participants in the study stated they were well aware of this risk and took precautionary measures to protect their families. Kosciw and Diaz (2008) also claim negative perceptions of LGBQTT people can create an implicitly hostile environment that is challenging for LGBQTT-parented families.

The participants made a number of recommendations to address these challenges. The first part of this chapter will present recommendations regarding the need for professional

development for teachers and training for pre-service teachers. Following this are three sections that offer suggestions for teachers and principals on how they can continue to create and improve inclusive and supportive school communities for LGBQTT-parented families in isolated Northern Ontario towns. It is important to acknowledge that all the participants in this study stated they felt accepted and validated in their child's school. However, the participants' feelings of acceptance were often limited to face-to-face interactions during meetings with teachers and principals but less so with practices such as Mother's Day. And they did mention that teachers' discomfort regarding the inclusion of LGBQTT-parented families became apparent when confronted with opportunities to represent them in the curriculum. The following section offers suggestions for LGBQTT parents and a final discussion on the study's findings. Next, recommendations for future research on LGBQTT-parented families in school communities in Northern Ontario are discussed, while the chapter finishes with concluding remarks.

Professional development for teachers

Lisa, Karen, Andrew, and Grace spoke about the need for teachers to receive education regarding awareness of LGBQTT-parented families. This would provide an understanding about how teachers can create a classroom that celebrates diversity and inclusivity of children from non-normative families. The participants specifically mentioned the need for schools boards to offer mandatory professional development for teachers on homophobia and heterosexism. The need for professional development is highly supported by GLSEN and Harris Interactive (2008), Ryan and Martin (2000), and Meyer (2009). Each emphasizes how anti-bias training for school professionals can and must assist teachers in identifying how homophobia and heterosexist

prejudice are persistent in their school. They also suggest that such professional training should provide school professionals advice on how to challenge those prejudices with educational materials, which should, in turn, lead to further awareness and understanding of the effects of homophobia and heterosexism on LGBQTT parents and youth.

School districts in Northern Ontario might not have employees who are knowledgeable about the issues faced by LGBQTT people and who can deliver professional development seminars to teachers in their district. If that is the case, these school districts need to be aware of, and access, LGBT conferences being held for school professionals in Canada's larger cities. School districts in Northern Ontario could send specific teachers to these seminars and these teachers, in turn, could share this information with the rest of the professionals in their respective schools. Teachers in isolated Northern Ontario communities should have the same opportunities as teachers in larger cities to be educated about critical issues faced by LGBQTT parents and youth in schools. Lisa's experiences as a LGBQTT parent and teacher have enabled her to see first-hand the benefits that arise when teachers teach tolerance and acceptance of LGBQTT people in their classrooms and, like the other participants, she sees the importance of educating school professionals about the unique and complicated issues LGBQTT-parented families might encounter in isolated Northern Ontario communities. Ryan and Martin (2000) would agree with Lisa's statement. They highlight how educating school professionals about the numerous strengths LGBQTT-parented families have and the importance of inclusion of these families in school communities could serve as an important lesson for all families.

As three of the participants mentioned, teachers need to include LGBQTT-themed literature and lessons to create an inclusive classroom environment that is accepting of LGBQTT-parented families. Therefore, professional development training can provide valuable

assistance to teachers on how to successfully implement LGBQTT themes in their lessons. Barber and Krane's (2007) and Mudrey and Medina-Adams' (2006) work parallels these suggestions. The purpose of including LGBQTT themes in classroom lessons is to teach diversity, tolerance, acceptance, and understanding of LGBQTT people (Moita-Lopes, 2006).

Another good reason for school boards to provide professional development training on LGBQTT issues is to create a safer learning environment for all children and their families. As Lipkin (1996) notes, training for school professionals can help teachers include LGBQTT themes in the curriculum and increase support for teachers and students on how to react to parental objections toward the implementation of LGBQTT content in the classroom. As the participants mentioned, and as Lipkin (1996) argues, the inclusion of LGBQTT issues must be incorporated throughout the curriculum. He explained the dangers of limiting the discussion of LGBQTT people to the "sexual health" curriculum. One significant danger is the medicalization of homosexuality. Consequently, by limiting the discussion of LGBQTT issues to HIV curricula risks distorting students' perceptions about LGBQTT people by linking homosexuality to illness and deviance. Another danger in limiting the discussion of LGBQTT issues to the health curriculum is reinforcing the common misconception that homosexuality is exclusively about sexual activity. Professional development training must highlight the problems with this strategy and how school professionals can infuse LGBQTT themes in other subject areas. Lipkin (2006) suggests that social studies curriculum is one of the easiest subjects to allow for the integration of LGBQTT themes. For example, history is a secondary school subject that could easily integrate the historical representations of LGBQTT people and the evolution of LGBQTT identities.

One participant mentioned that the documentary film, *It's Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in Schools* should be included in professional development training for teachers. The film was created in order to assist educational professionals in effectively addressing LGBQTT people and issues in schools (Chasnoff & Cohen, 1995). It includes age-appropriate lessons on how to integrate LGBQTT themes in the classroom. *It's Elementary* models how teachers can incorporate lessons on stereotypes and family diversity in order to create a greater understanding of LGBQTT people. It was produced to promote tolerance and acceptance LGBQTT people in hopes of reducing homophobic prejudice and violence in schools. More specifically, the purpose of the documentary is to help school professionals teach children about sexuality identity, tolerance, and diversity in the classroom. It would be a valuable component to professional development because it shows how crucial it is for educators to acknowledge and discuss LGBQTT issues in age-appropriate ways in their classrooms because, by doing so, they have the ability to decrease prejudice and violence in schools (Giugni & Semann, 2004).

The need for training teachers on how to speak to children about LGBQTT-parented families is supported by Casper, Schultz, and Wickens (1992) and Ryan and Martin (2000). The researchers agree that professional development training must incorporate inclusive language. Teachers must become aware of how language in the classroom can have a negative impact on LGBQTT-parented families. For example, continually talking about "mommies and daddies" together can often isolate and exclude non-normative families. Professional development training needs to instead teach educators about inclusive language that describes all family configurations. It also must address how some teachers believe that using the words "gay" and "lesbian" around children is inappropriate. Casper, Schultz, and Wickens (1992) assert that

teachers must be educated to understand that using these words will not encourage children to become homosexuals and that they are not inappropriate words for the classroom.

Maher (2007) and Ryan and Martin (2000) suggest that attending professional development training also helps to reduce negative opinions and dispel misconceptions about LGBQTT people. People who hold religious beliefs often have negative reactions to training which addresses LGBQTT issues. These beliefs also preclude their support or acknowledgement of LGBQTT parents. This further highlights the need for professional development training for school professionals because school personnel must be strongly encouraged to separate their personal beliefs from the needs of LGBQTT parents (Ryan & Martin, 2000). Doing so would also serve as an important lesson for their students by demonstrating to them how to relate to others in a pluralistic society. The main lesson for students is that they will encounter others who might not agree with their morals and values; nevertheless, they need to learn how to coexist peacefully regardless of their differences.

Training for pre-service teachers

Mudrey and Medina-Adams (2006), and Robinson and Ferfolja (2001), along with the participants, illustrate the great need for pre-service teachers to be educated on how to create equitable classroom environments inclusive to LGBQTT-parenting families. It is crucial that LGBQTT issues are addressed in pre-service courses given the level of homophobic violence and discrimination experienced by people who are LGBQTT or perceived to be LGBQTT in educational institutions. Robinson and Ferfolja's (2001) research findings on the need to address gay and lesbian issues in pre-service teacher education are consistent with the findings of my study. They found that many pre-service teachers perceived LGBQTT issues, and discussion

about sexuality as irrelevant in their future classrooms. They also found that many pre-service teachers' assumption of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1993) in the classroom to be the cause of individual discrimination. Compulsory heterosexuality is a concept that exposes how heterosexuality is constructed as natural and universal. It is the assumption that women and men are innately physically, emotionally, and sexually attracted to one another. This institutionalization of heterosexuality leads to discrimination against LGBQTT people (Rich, 1993). The beliefs and assumptions held by these future teachers pose serious concerns for parents and students. These future teachers are at risk of alienating and excluding LGBQTT parents and students.

Hatton (1996), and three participants in the study, claim that many teacher education programs do not adequately prepare their students to discuss issues regarding homophobia and diversity in their daily lessons. One reason for the lack of preparation by teacher education programs is that many professors also believe discussion of LGBQTT issues is controversial and taboo (Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001). Some professors do not feel comfortable addressing diversity in the university classroom which is detrimental to the education of pre-service teachers (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001).

Walton (2005a) observes that equity and diversity issues in education are often only relegated to a small segment of teacher education courses, many of which are electives. Robinson and Ferfolja (2001) assert that institutionalized homophobia is another significant reason why discussion about social justice and equity that include LGBQTT issues are often left out of classroom discussions all together. Teacher education programs must go beyond situating LGBQTT issues in the sex education portion of health and physical education. This tokenistic approach to discussing LGBQTT people shows how the traditional curriculum in teacher

education programs has operated within a discourse that normalizes heterosexuality. The infusion of queer pedagogy in teacher education courses could enable pre-service teachers an opportunity to critically unpack and challenge the normalized discourses that perpetuate fictitious hierarchal relations of power that leads to the privileging of the two-parent heteronormative family model over other family structures. Moreover, teaching queer pedagogy to pre-service teachers would facilitate a greater understanding on how normalized discourses construct knowledge about sexuality and gender and how these discourses are routinely performed in school communities. Overall, professors who teach in teacher education programs must model to their students how issues regarding social justice, equity and diversity can be incorporated into all aspects of the curriculum.

Recommendations for Teachers

As the participants in this study strongly suggest, teachers play a key role in creating inclusive school communities. They made several recommendations to assist teachers on how they can be proactive and work together with families in order to create a welcoming, accepting classroom environment for diverse families. Their recommendations are as follows.

1) **Open communication between parents and teachers needs to be reciprocal.** In order to demonstrate their willingness to create an inclusive classroom for LGBQTT-parented families, teachers need to approach parents, by calling them at home or speaking to them at school, to open lines of communication between both parties. More importantly, teachers need to feel comfortable approaching LGBQTT parents with any questions or concerns they have regarding their family. Several of the participants mentioned that teachers need to show their acceptance of

LGBQTT-parented families by initiating open dialogue, which in turn creates understanding between themselves and families. Teachers need to play an active role in keeping the lines of communication open between themselves and the parents. Although open communication between parents and teacher is important to create inclusive school environments, yet it often does not occur in schools. The absence of dialogue is partly due to homophobic attitudes and heterosexist assumptions that presume issues regarding LGBQTT people are private and should not be discussed (Walton, 2005). Goldstein, Collins, and Halder (2007) state many people mistakenly believe that discussing LGBQTT issues is private because they unconsciously link homosexuals to sexual activity. Further, some teachers may not feel comfortable speaking to LGBQTT parents due to their own personal biases. Ryan and Martin (2000) assert homophobic prejudices and/or religious beliefs held by school professionals are major obstacles to the creation of open and honest communication with LGBQTT parents. Nevertheless, the recommendations made by the participants in this study are very clear. Teachers need to become responsive and educated about non-normative families and it should not be left up to the parents to always have to go into the school to initiate conversation with the teacher.

2) **Classroom activities and lessons need to include representations of LGBQTT-parented families.** If teachers know that one of their student's has LGBQTT parents, then they must find a way to include materials that represent these families. Teachers in isolated Northern Ontario communities may be less likely to have access to LGBQTT curriculum materials in their communities compared to teachers in larger cities. Nevertheless, the internet can be a valuable tool for rural teachers. With minimal effort, teachers can find resources they need in order to increase representation of LGBQTT-parented families in their classroom. Several participants in this study expressed the need for their children to see representations of LGBQTT families

reflected in the classroom curriculum. Moreover, some participants stated that it is the teacher's responsibility to seek out materials that they can include in their lessons that represents LGBQTT-parented families. A teacher's interest in creating an inclusive classroom environment would hopefully be obvious to parents when they see the effort a teacher exhibits to include their family in the classroom curriculum and activities. There are many positive implications for teachers and parents when LGBQTT-parented families are included in the curriculum. For one, this could encourage a positive, open relationship between the parent and teacher; it could also assist in creating a more supportive, tolerant and accepting environment by educating other parents and children about family diversity. The benefits of such a connection are numerous for all children.

3) **Teachers need to take risks in the classroom.** The need for teachers to challenge their colleagues and students to think beyond the heteronormative biases that are prevalent throughout the curriculum was an important issue discussed by the participants. It is crucial that teachers acknowledge the power that they have to make changes within their classroom that will leave a lasting impression on their students. Moreover, teachers must take risks by recognizing important opportunities or "teachable moments" that occur in the classroom on a daily basis. Teachers must engage their students in discussion beyond what has been prescribed in curriculum documents.

4) **Provide a supportive and open classroom environment for their students.** Beyond supporting all of their students, teachers need to be acutely aware that unique issues may arise for children with LGBQTT parents in isolated Northern Ontario communities that could require additional support. For this to occur, LGBQTT parents must have disclosed their family configuration to their child's teacher. Also, teachers need to understand how the socially

conservative climate that frequently exists in geographically isolated communities can be challenging for children with LGBQTT parents. Teachers in Northern Ontario communities must be aware of the risks that LGBQTT parents face when they choose to fully disclose their family configuration in such a climate. Therefore, creating an open and supportive school environment for children with LGBQTT parents in Northern Ontario is critical for their safety and success in school. Teachers need to remain aware that these children may need extra support in certain circumstances. They also need to know when they should step back to observe the children and allow them to speak for themselves. It is important for teachers to listen to their students as they may actually learn about family diversity from them.

Recommendations for Principals

Principals have a crucial role to play in creating an inclusive, equitable school environment for LGBQTT-parented families in isolated Northern Ontario communities. Two recommendations discussed by Lisa, Andrew, and Karen are listed as follows.

1) **Administrators need to be role models by demonstrating their continual support for inclusion and equity for all members of the school community.** Several of the participants mentioned the significant impact that principals have on the school community. Undoubtedly, principals 'set the tone' in the school, and play a key role in determining the path of inclusiveness in their school. As found in this study, principals who demonstrate their acceptance of LGBQTT-parented families in school communities create an environment where open and honest relationships between parent and teacher are more likely to arise. As I previously mentioned, there are numerous benefits for school communities when principals demonstrate their support for the inclusion LGBQTT-parented families.

2) **Support teachers who are trying to infuse LGBQTT issues into their classroom curriculum.** Several parents in this study stated that principals need to provide support and assurance for teachers who address issues in their classroom that might be considered controversial by other parents. Heterosexual parents who live in isolated Northern Ontario communities, which do not have highly visible LGBQTT populations that larger cities have, might be vehemently opposed to teachers trying to include LGBQTT themes in their classroom. Since this is highly likely to be a contentious issue in socially conservative communities, principals need to support the teachers in their school. Principals have the opportunity to create a safe environment for discourse on LGBQTT-parented families where teachers are encouraged to create inclusive classrooms by infusing the curriculum with LGBQTT themes. More specifically, principals can lead teachers in creating a school community where all LGBQTT people feel safe, accepted, and included. Principals need to take full advantage of the important opportunity to support their teachers in creating a school environment that values diversity and equity for all families.

Recommendations for LGBQTT parents

Each participant was asked if they had any specific recommendations for LGBQTT parents in school communities. There were four key recommendations participants made to assist LGBQTT parents and their children in facilitating positive interactions between their families and the school community.

1) **Practice full disclosure of your family configuration in schools.** Each participant spoke adamantly about the need for parents to come out in school communities. They all mentioned how critical it is for parents to be open and completely honest with teachers and the

principal. Fully disclosing their family structure in Northern Ontario communities is even more crucial because it is highly likely that many teachers and principals have never met an LGBQTT-parented family who practiced full disclosure in their school. This visibility is important in order to normalize family structures that do not fit into the two-parent heteronormative family model. Also, it is through open communication that LGBQTT parents can establish a connection with their child's teachers. Creating an open dialogue between the LGBQTT-parented families and school communities is crucial for the educational success and confidence of their children. It is only through full disclosure that a strong parent-teacher relationship can develop.

Participants did recognize, however, how coming out could be a difficult decision for some parents to make. Nevertheless, the benefits of full disclosure of LGBQTT-parented families in their children's school are many. My analysis of the data also identified a variety of problems LGBQTT-parented families could encounter if they choose not to be open about their family structure in schools. Choosing a more private strategy hinders the opportunity to create an open and honest dialogue with the teacher and would likely only hurt the child. Two of the participants noted that the burden of secrecy is not fair to the child because they will encounter numerous situations at school were they will have to hide their family structure. Practicing full disclosure of family configuration in school communities was the most important recommendation offered by the participants in this study.

2) **Support children by advocating for their rights.** All the participants insisted it is critical that LGBQTT parents speak out against injustices and advocate for the rights of their children and families. Children's rights in Canada are clearly outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. There are three rights enshrined in the convention that apply to the legal rights of children with LGBQTT parents. Article 2 outlines no child should

suffer from any form of discrimination. This relates to every child "irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's race, colour, sex, language, political or other opinions, social origin, or other status" (Howe & Covell, 2007). Next, Article 14 establishes the rights of the child and parent to freedom of thought and conscience. Finally, Article 16 defines that a child has the right to be protected from unlawful interference and attacks on their privacy, family or on their honour and reputation (Howe & Covell, 2007).

The overwhelming belief of the participants was if they did not advocate and support their child at school, then incidences of injustices and discrimination could occur without the school doing anything about it. Part of advocating for your child is looking out for them at all times. Being proactive and aware of teachers who are not supportive of non-normative families is one part of advocacy. The benefits of advocating for one's child and family in schools are abundant. Several participants mentioned how LGBQTT-parented families can assist schools in becoming more inclusive and accepting. Since social acceptance of LGBQTT-parented families is a part of broader social change, schools should reflect inclusion of LGBQTT-parented families, while parents continue advocating for their rights of their families. It is important for school communities to acknowledge LGBQTT parents when they are proactive and advocate for their children. LGBQTT parents need to be proactive and create open dialogue between their families and the school. Due to lack of training in teacher's college and absence of professional development on LGBQTT-parented families, some teachers might not be knowledgeable about how to create inclusive classrooms; through advocacy from parents, teachers begin to learn how to create equitable classrooms that are inclusive of LGBQTT-parented families in isolated Northern Ontario communities.

3) **Normalize LGBQTT-parented families by participating in school communities.** LGBQTT parents need to participate in their child's school in order to normalize their family structure, that is, ensuring that their family is treated like any other family at school. Involvement of LGBQTT parents in schools in isolated Northern Ontario communities provides a model for other parents and school staff by showing them how LGBQTT parents' interactions and communications are similar to other families. The participants in this study were adamant that involvement in schools is important because it places LGBQTT parents beside all the other parents on school trips, at school concerts, with all serving in the same capacity, that of parents. Parental participation in schools not only normalizes the family structure, but also gives parents a valuable opportunity to model confidence, comfort, and pride to their children about being open about their family.

4) **Open communication with your child.** Four of the participants stated that it is critical for LGBQTT parents to initiate open and honest discussions with their children. Parents need to be aware of their child's feelings regarding their parents' sexuality identity and they must also understand how their sexuality identity can have a profound effect on the lives of their children. Several of the parents mentioned that maintaining open communication with their children is also important so they can find out if their child is having any difficulties at school due to their family structure. When LGBQTT parents and their children maintain open communication, they are more able to provide the support and encouragement that their child may need.

Political Implications for Family Identity and Representations in Schools

A re-examination of the participants' high involvement in schools seems to have led to their feelings of acceptance in schools and provides insight for the political implications of

LGBQTT-parented families' representations in schools. The study's findings suggest that contact with other parents and school professionals might have contributed to LGBQTT-parented families being normalized and accepted. Thus, the visibility and interactions the LGBQTT parents have with heterosexual parents could lead them to see LGBQTT parents as the same as any other parent. Therefore, if heterosexuals see homosexuals as the 'same' as themselves, they may not feel as threatened or anxious around them. Also, several of the participants mentioned they felt like any other family. This leads me to the question: Would the participants positive interactions be different if they identified as radical queers who openly questioned the natural positioning of heterosexuality as the dominant sexuality? Being viewed as a 'good homosexual' who does not disrupt cultural binaries is a key underlying factor that contributed to the participants' feelings of acceptance and validation. Sedgwick (1990) explains that the power in the heterosexual-us/homosexual-them binary enables heterosexuals to have the authority to accept, reject, or judge the 'other.' Queer theorists such as Sedgwick reinforce the notion that identities are unstable and constantly shifting and constructed (Robinson, 2007). Also, queer theory seeks to disrupt fixed and stable categories. However, these participants did in fact describe their sexuality identity in a fixed, stable manner. Therefore, queer theory is limited in its ability to explain these participants' perspectives about their identities. The participants did not describe their sexuality identity as unstable and shifting, and were all very comfortable identifying themselves within a fixed and stable category.

This inconsistency between the participants' beliefs and the theoretical framework of the study leads me to the question: why disrupt fixed identity categories when the participants in the study were satisfied to identify themselves as either lesbian, gay, or two-spirited? The participants expressed how they accepted their sexuality identity and felt pride and comfort in

reaching this level of acceptance. Ultimately, it seems unnecessary to disrupt and destabilize these categories when the participants were content with their fixed identity, despite the implication that acceptance relies on constructions of sameness. In addition, beliefs about identity stability have political implications. For instance, some LGBQTT people believe in the gay liberalism notion that LGBQTT people are no different than heterosexuals and therefore deserve the same rights. Others believe that by stating LGBQTT identities are stable and fixed, like heterosexuality is assumed to be, they are ultimately the same. The consequences of these beliefs are that LGBQTT people are continually striving for acceptance by the heterosexual majority. Within this model, LGBQTT people need to live 'respectably' which is defined by heterosexual norms. Contrary to such ideas, many LGBQTT people do not believe that they need to seek acceptance of heterosexuals. Moreover, they do not consider their sexuality identity as equal or similar to the dominant sexuality identity, heterosexuality. It can be argued that school communities are more comfortable with fixed sexuality identity categories, even if it means having to acknowledge LGBQTT identities. For instance, the unknown, constantly shifting, unstable categories can create discomfort and upheaval for many heterosexuals. If the participants' sexuality identities did not imply stability, this could increase feelings of uneasiness among heterosexual parents at their children's schools, and ultimately threaten the participants' feelings about being accepted and validated within isolated Northern Ontario school communities.

Despite the limitation of queer theory, its inclusion is useful in other respects. It allows parents and teachers to deconstruct fixed family categories in order to interrogate and fully understand how heteronormativity effects the interactions of LGBQTT parents. For instance, one way the participants challenged family categories embedded in heteronormative schools was by

coming out and being visible. Through their visibility and interactions with other members of the school community they were deconstructing and reconstructing the heteronormative family model that is oppressive for LGBQTT-parented families. Implementing a queer theory framework interrogates hegemonic discourses that privilege heterosexual identities in heteronormative and heterosexist school communities. Heteronormativity is a concept that reveals how power operates in society. Unquestionably the dominant sexuality identity is heterosexuality. Queer theory challenges its status as the "normal" and "natural" sexuality identity. Moreover, in order to reduce incidents of homophobic violence in schools, the superior positioning of heterosexuality in heteronormative institutions must be questioned and challenged. Queer theory destabilizes the culture of power, which can lead heterosexuals to justify acts of violence and abuse towards 'inferior' sexuality identities. The inclusion of queer theory into school communities in Northern Ontario would allow school professionals to understand how the reinforcement of gender and cultural norms, and the problematization of sexuality identities that do not fit into these norms, plays a key role in the exclusion of LGBQTT-parented families in the curriculum, as witnessed by the participants in the study.

The participants in this study offered me a unique opportunity to understand whether or not living in an isolated community in Northern Ontario has affected their interactions in their children's school. The findings from the study indicate that the experiences of LGBQTT-parented families in isolated communities in Northern Ontario are not significantly different from the experiences of LGBQTT-parented families in larger cities in Canada. A common assumption is that smaller communities are more homophobic and hostile towards LGBQTT people, whereas larger cities are more welcoming. Based on my findings, I would argue that the difference between rural and urban communities is not as distinct as widely believed.

Homophobia, heteronormativity, and heterosexism exist in all communities. It is highly unlikely that any LGBQTT parents, regardless of where they are living, will be able to completely avoid homophobia, heteronormativity and heterosexism. Like LGBQTT parents in larger cities (Casper & Schultz, 1999), the participants in the study also voiced that homophobia, heteronormativity, and heterosexism are prevalent in school communities.

With its emphasis on blurring boundaries, queer theory offers an important perspective on the rural versus urban debate. Queer theory interrogates the hypothetical distinction between rural and urban by claiming these categories are not fixed and stable. Instead, these categories are fluid and constantly shifting. Thus, the experiences of LGBQTT-parented families cannot be divided into rural and urban categories because the distinction between each setting is not as rigid as prevailing stereotypes suggest.

LGBQTT-parented families who live in isolated communities in Northern Ontario have their own unique experiences, even while their communities can be broadly characterized as relatively isolated and socially conservative. Overarching assumptions that conclude that all LGBQTT-parented families in isolated Northern Ontario communities have similar experiences cannot be made. While LGBQTT parents in this region will likely have less opportunity to meet and spend time in inclusive social spaces with other LGBQTT parents and the resources and services that offer support to LGBQTT parents are limited in isolated communities such as those in Northern Ontario, the participants implied that LGBQTT-parented families create their own social support networks that help their families counteract the negative effects of living in a heteronormative society. LGBQTT-parented families find strength and support in a more close-knit and interdependent community that they create with heterosexual-parented families.

Given LGBQTT-parented families in isolated communities in Northern Ontario might not meet other LGBQTT-parented families in school communities, the strong support and connection to other families who are supportive of non-normative families is crucial. Morton (2003) conducted a study on LGBQTT youth in rural Ontario. The most common theme from her study was feelings of isolation and loneliness. Additionally, a study conducted by Haag and Chang (1997) suggests LGBQTT adults who do not form strong social support networks are at risk of suffering from isolation and loneliness. In contrast, feelings of isolation and loneliness were not expressed by the participants in this study. In my study, it was the participants' very ability to create social support networks that decreased feelings of isolation that one might predict would occur in small, isolated, and rural communities in Northern Ontario.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research on the experiences of LGBQTT-parented families in Northern Ontario school communities is needed to answer many questions that were not addressed in or arose from this study. Several recommended areas for future research are:

1. Future research could examine the interactions of LGBQTT-parented families who do not practice full disclosure in their children's school. Conducting a study on the experiences of LGBQTT-parented families who utilize a private strategy regarding their family configuration in schools could yield very different findings. Recruiting closeted participants for a future study, however, could be difficult because individuals who are closeted would likely consider their sexuality identities to be private.

2. Future research could involve recruiting a larger sample of participants who are from various socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, and education levels. Recruiting a large, diverse group of participants from a broad range of demographic backgrounds could enable future researchers to better generalize their findings.
3. Include the perspectives of children who are raised by LGBQTT parents to provide a greater understanding of how the children manage issues related to their family structure at school. As Clark, Kitzinger, and Potter (2004) reported on homophobic bullying, parents may not accurately assess or report their child's experiences. Indeed, parents might be completely unaware of how their family configuration impacts their children in school (Clark, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004). According to Fairtlough (2008), LGBQTT parents are often unaware of the effects of their family configuration on their children because their children may try to conceal the abuse they suffer to defend and protect their parents from the homophobia.
4. Future research could compare interactions LGBQTT-parented families have in primary school versus secondary school.
5. While this study focused specifically on the experiences of LGBQTT parents, it would be very interesting to include the voices of teachers and principals who are employed in Northern Ontario rural and urban schools, including those who have worked with children with LGBQTT parents and those who have not.
6. Future research on teachers and principals' perspectives on how to create inclusive school environments for LGBQTT-parented families, for example, by incorporating LGBQTT-themes in lessons and activities, would be informative for professional development and training seminars for teachers. Extensive research has been

conducted on teachers' reasons, apprehensions, and willingness to include LGBQTT content in their classrooms (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Bower & Klecka, 2009; Larrabee & Morehead, 2008; Maney & Cain, 1997). Nevertheless, future research could specifically address how school professionals can examine their own biases and gain a greater understanding of how their personal beliefs and teaching practices might contribute to heteronormative and homophobic school environments that marginalize LGBQTT people.

7. A similar study could be conducted in which more gay fathers and lesbian mothers were represented. Moreover, future research could link the gender of the parent with issues they encounter in school communities.
8. Future research could examine the differences between intentional and blended families' experiences in Northern Ontario school communities.

Towards Social Change

In the introduction, I described the homophobic violence experienced by Jane Currie and Anji Dimitriou at their children's school in Oshawa, Ontario. Although this incident occurred in a larger city in Southern Ontario, it could certainly have taken place in Northern Ontario. The pervasiveness of homophobic harassment and violence transcends rural and urban categories. One cannot assume that schools in small communities in Northern Ontario are more homophobic than schools in larger cities Southern Ontario. Both rural and urban centres in Ontario have socially and politically conservative populations who are more likely to oppose the inclusion of LGBQTT-parented families in schools. Indeed, school communities, regardless of their geographical location, are heteronormative institutions that continue to implicitly and explicitly

perpetuate heterosexist discourses that marginalize and oppress LGBQTT-parented families. Homophobia thrives in all school communities and is a chronic problem that continues to be unaddressed by many school professionals. As stated by the participants in the study, the threat of homophobic harassment and violence is a reality that they are acutely aware of when they are interacting in their children's school.

Despite the limitations previously outlined in the study, my research offered some LGBQTT parents an opportunity to share their personal stories regarding the nature of the interactions with their children's schools. These narratives were shared by parents who fully disclose their sexuality identity in all areas of their life. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that all LGBQTT parents have similar experiences as the participants in the study.

There was a contradiction between the participants' feelings of acceptance and validation and incidents that perpetuated feelings of exclusion and invisibility in school communities. As the participants explained in this study, there are various reasons why they felt included, validated, or accepted in their child's school, but these feelings of acceptance and validation were limited to face-to-face interactions with teachers and principals. LGBQTT parents were led to feel invisible and excluded due to the non-representation of their families in the curriculum. Thus, it was also teachers' discomfort regarding if and how to represent LGBQTT-parented families that lead to feelings of exclusion. When school professionals exclude and ignore LGBQTT-parented families' experiences, they are at risk of losing the many benefits that the inclusion of these families can offer school communities.

Results from the study indicate that LGBQTT parents are highly engaged in their children's school. Furthermore, their active involvement in school is beneficial to all members of the school communities because LGBQTT parents work hard to create a safe, inclusive, and

enriching learning environment for their children, which in turn benefits all children in the school.

On the whole, I hope that reporting these stories will benefit LGBQTT parents in Northern Ontario, regardless of their level of disclosure, by drawing attention to a minority group that is still not unconditionally accepted in school communities. I hope that the research findings and recommendations offered by the participants will provide teachers, principals, and other LGBQTT parents within the school community an opportunity to understand and reflect upon how they can personally create a more inclusive school environment that recognizes and celebrates all family configurations.

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Appendix A: Poster for participants

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Two-Spirited and Trans-Identified Parents needed for Research Study

LGBQTT parents, who live in Northern Ontario and have children 21 years of age and under, are currently needed to participate in a MEd research project that explores the nature of their experiences in school communities. Participants will be interviewed for approximately 60 minutes. Anonymity in all published reports is guaranteed because each participant will be given a pseudonym. If you are interested in volunteering, please send an email to the researcher, MEd student Natalie Rowlandson, at nlrowlan@lakeheadu.ca for further details.

Appendix B: Informed Consent Cover Letter

Hello,

My name is Natalie Rowlandson. I am a Master's student in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University. Working under the supervision of Dr. Gerald Walton, I am conducting a qualitative research study on the nature of the interactions of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Trans-Identified, and Two Spirited (LGBQTT) parents in their children's schools in Northern Ontario. I am requesting your participation in this study, which I hope will help generate a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of LGBQTT parents within school contexts. Participation will consist of one 60 minute tape-recorded interview, which will take place in a location of your choice. If you participate, you may withdraw from this study at any time. All data generated during this study will remain confidential and you will remain anonymous. You will be given a pseudonym that will be used in reporting findings and discussions with my supervisor and committee member. Neither the city or town that you live in nor the school where your child is enrolled will be used in this thesis. Upon completion of my thesis, the data will be securely stored at Lakehead University for five years after which it will be destroyed.

By participating, you will be contributing to social justice for LGBQTT parents in Canada, particularly in non-urban regions. It is vital that the voices of LGBQTT parents are heard and that schools develop increased awareness and policy on family diversity. Additionally, this study could serve to further encourage teachers, administrators, and heterosexual parents to foster inclusive school communities. If requested, I will provide you with a summary of the findings of the study.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me (phone: (807) 285-2125, email: nlrowlan@lakeheadu.ca), or direct your inquiries to my faculty supervisor, Dr. Gerald Walton (phone: (807) 343-8636, email: gwalton@lakeheadu.ca), or Lisa Norton, Research Ethics and Administration Officer, Lakehead University (phone: (807) 343-8283, email: lisa.norton@lakeheadu.ca).

Respectfully,

Natalie Rowlandson

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

I the undersigned (print name) _____ agree to participate in a study on the nature of the interactions of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Trans-Identified, and Two-Spirited (LGBQTT) parents in their children's schools and agree to be interviewed by Natalie Rowlandson, Master of Education student at Lakehead University. I have read and understand the cover letter, purpose and procedures of the study. I also understand the following ethical considerations:

- As a volunteer, I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.
- All information is confidential.
- I am aware that the interview will be tape recorded.
- The collected data will be stored for 5 years at Lakehead University.
- There is little or no risk of physical or psychological harm to me.
- I have the right to choose not to answer any question.
- My identity will remain anonymous in any publication and presentation of the research findings.
- At my request, I will receive a summary of the research.

Participant Signature _____ **Date** _____

If you would like a synopsis of the thesis, please provide your email or mailing address here:

_____

_____

Appendix D: Tentative Interview Guide

1) Describe your family arrangement.
2) How would you describe your interactions in your children's school?
3) How does your child describe his/her experiences at school?
4) Are parent-teacher relationships important to you? If so, why? If not, why not?
5) What are the attitudes and behaviours that you believe have a positive impact on your relationship with teachers and principals?
6) What are the attitudes and behaviours that you believe have a negative impact on your relationship with teachers and principals?
7) Are you 'out' at your child's school? If so, how and why did you disclose, and how did the teachers and principals react? If not, why have you chosen to remain 'closeted' in your child's school?
8) What word best describes your feelings about being a LGBQTT parent in your child's school: accepted, validated, excluded, or marginalized? What experiences have led you to feel this way?
9) Do you believe the size and geographical location of your city or area in Northern Ontario has an effect on your family's experiences at school?
10) Are you aware of any representations of LGBQTT-parented families in the school curriculum?
11) What do you believe schools need to do to become supportive and inclusive of LGBQTT parented families?
12) Based on your experiences, what suggestions do you have for teachers and principals?
13) What advice do you have for other LGBQTT parents?
14) Other comments?